# ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

JUNE 8

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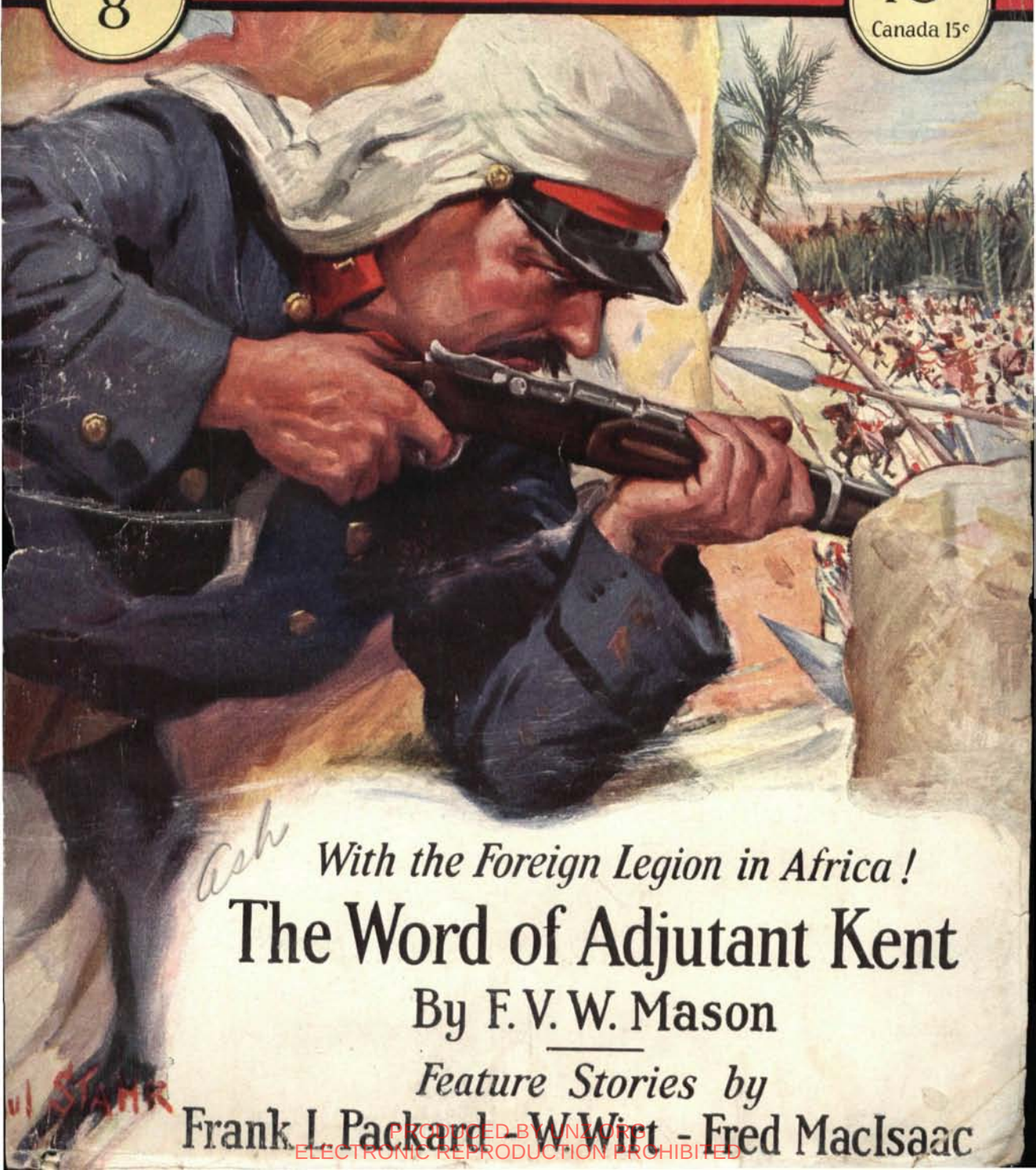

*With the Foreign Legion in Africa!*

## The Word of Adjutant Kent

By F. V. W. Mason

*Feature Stories by*

Frank L. Packard - W. Wirt - Fred MacIsaac

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# ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 204 | CONTENTS FOR JUNE 8, 1929 | NUMBER 2


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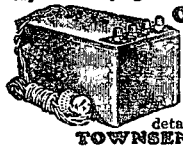

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ARGOSY
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 204 | SATURDAY, JUNE 8, 1929 | NUMBER 2

*"Any other skunk that wants the same dose, step right up!"*

# The Word of Adjutant Kent

*Legionnaire Roger Kent, the wreck of a fine soldier, faces his life's crisis when the lonely Foreign Legion outpost in the African jungle is menaced by the Arab Suleiman's army*

**By F. V. W. MASON**

***Author of "Captain Nemesis," "The Sword of Vengeance," etc.***

## CHAPTER I.

### A LEGIONNAIRE IN DISGRACE.

ANKLE-DEEP in the sluggish coffee-colored current of the Goruol River, some eight or ten haggard men toiled listlessly with crowbars and sledge hammers to bore three small holes in the brown rock that formed the bed of the stream. On the bank above the sweat-bathed workers sat a guard in the blue and white uniform of the Foreign Legion, a rifle lying across his knees. Though he sat as motionless as a figure of bronze the perspiration coursed down his leathery cheeks in minute shiny trickles.

*"Allo! là! Un croc!"* One of the laborers, a man with a massive frame and a thatch of sand-colored hair,



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straightened painfully from his work and pointed a dirty forefinger at a barely visible ripple that was moving steadily toward that part of the shore where the—*ième Compagnie* of the Legion was in the process of building a little stone pier.

With a somnolent grunt the guard deliberately raised his Lebel rifle, sighted a moment, then shot at the ripple; his duties of guarding the prisoners included driving off the marauding crocodiles that had more than once dragged unhappy legionnaires to an exceedingly painful death.

At the sound of the report, crashingly loud in the oppressive heat, the other prisoners apathetically straightened their backs and stared at the spurt of foam where the bullet struck. There was a sudden submarine flurry as the missile struck, glanced and ricocheted with a dismal whine off over the unhealthily green grass on the far shore.

From among the rushes arose clouds of frightened birds that circled high into the hot, humid sky, then settled again out of sight.

"Missed him," remarked the big man disgustedly. "That guy couldn't hit a flight o' barns if they were tied down—"

"*Allez!* Go on, you lazy swine!" growled the guard, stung by the prisoner's remark. "More work and less talk, camel of an *Américain!*" The guard slapped a vivid green fly that had lighted on his neck, prepared to resume his seat, but hesitated when along the shore appeared another legionnaire hurrying at top speed. The white skirt of his puggaree fluttered out behind like a white signal flag.

The prisoners in the water rested, thankful for an opportunity to halt before the dynamite should be inserted for the next blast.

"Look at the beggar 'urry," remarked an undersized wiry little man among the prisoners. "Tuppence old Laurier is abaht to peg out—tyke me, Kent?"

The American with a bitter curse passed the back of a hand over his bloated, bristle-covered cheeks to drive off the multitude of flies that attempted to congregate there, and studied the new arrival.

"No," said he as the messenger arrived and pantingly delivered his message. "More likely old Suleiman Tombohko's advance guard has finally showed up—God, I'm thirsty!"

"'Oo? Old Solomon, the Slave Raider?" The smaller man's eyes grew large in the deep tan of his sharp, reddish face. "I thought 'e were scuppered larst season down on the Gongola."

"As usual, Jerry, you thought wrong," observed the man addressed as Kent. "Old Suleiman's damned well alive and ornerier than a moose in November. Oh, God! What I'd give for a drink!" He glared fiercely at a bright-hued kingfisher that darted by, a gleaming azure jewel against the green of the tangled forest across the river.

THERE was more than a trace of bitterness in the little cockney's glance as he turned from observing the two excited legionnaires on the bank to look at the long, rugged face of his friend.

"You and yer drink!" he half snarled with a flash of gold teeth. "Yer mykes me fair sick! It's yer damned guzzlin' wot's got us this trip to the *corvée* like it 'as a 'undred times afore." He stirred and the current rippled oilily about his ankles and broke over the chain that linked them together as he moved away in deep disgust.

"Drink, drink, drink!" continued the cockney over his shoulder. "Carn't yer think of anythink else, yer big drunk? Cut it out, I tells yer, ye're only 'arf a jump from the funny farm via the *cafard** route."

* Going insane from loneliness and monotony.

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At the cockney's shrill abuse, the big man's grip on the rusty crowbar tightened convulsively.

"Shut up, you little Limey whelp!" he cried, his coarsened features writhing. "Say another word and I'll smash yer damned head!"

Jerry retreated toward the shore. He knew that in moments like this his bosom friend, Kent, was not far removed from a homicidal maniac; the craze for the drink that had been the blond giant's undoing was torturing, maddening him beyond control. The other prisoners, regarding the two speakers, moved aside, hopelessly, endlessly brushing off the swarms of stinging, humming insects that formed shimmering black halos about their heat-tortured brows.

"*Allo là!*" The guard had arisen and was beckoning the workers ashore. "Hurry up, you scrapings! *Soldats* Kent and Schwartz, take up the dynamite and march behind. *Allez!*"

With sudden energy the prisoners waded ashore, their ankle chains clanking softly, and with the green slime of the river clinging to their dirtied white trouser legs.

"Ah! The good Suleiman," murmured a lowering Greek with close-shaved head, "he will give us a nice little vacation."

Very quickly the detachment fell in with a guard on either side and commenced to ascend the long, low slope that led to the newly erected *poste* of Dori. Its walls of sun-baked brick were neither very high nor very thick, but they nevertheless formed an effective shelter against such crude weapons as the swarming Mamprusi and Damerghu war parties carried. These fierce tribesmen bitterly resented the efforts of Mme. la Republique to put an end to slave trading, and objected very strenuously to the French interference.

"Gawd, wot a 'ell 'ole," groaned Jerry as he eyed the post. "No food, no life, no sport, nothink but fever 'eat and stinks. Hi 'opes as 'ow Hi goes west in the next shindy."

The *poste* comprised a long, low group of whitish buildings on the top of a small hill commanding a ford and a bend in the river. A single tower was reared higher than the balance of the buildings and from its crenellated top sprouted a flagstaff. On this the tricolor of France drooped listlessly.

Under the visor of a stained and battered *képi* Jerry glanced sidewise at his comrade; the tall American was toiling up the slope, a small blue box of dynamite balanced on his naked shoulder.

"Blowin' like a bloody foundered 'orse," muttered the cockney to himself. "And 'e orter do it wiv never a sigh. 'E's fair rotten wiv the liquor."

Presently the little column of the disgraced passed through the heavy timbered gate and found themselves in the midst of feverish activity. Everywhere were legionnaires sweating and cursing wearily as though preparing to repel an attack in force. Case after case of ammunition was withdrawn from the white-walled magazine and placed in convenient corners. Pails of water, too, were produced and set beside the yellow ammunition boxes. Everywhere was orderly confusion and the bull voice of Manuel Espada, the sole remaining sergeant, rang over all the noise.

As the prisoners halted in a single ragged line, a corporal issued at a trot from the main barracks and approached the guard, his face quivering with heat and apprehension.

THERE was an expression of surprise on the guard's face as he took the message. Then he spat resoundingly as he faced the wretches before him.

"Prisoner Kent! Step out!"

Stupidly the big prisoner raised bleared and hollow gray eyes and shambled forward to the accompanying clatter of his ankle chains.

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"Stand up, pig!" rasped the guard, irritably. "You are to report to the captain at once. Pray God, he removes your quarrelsome, devil-sired presence forever. Get along now! Take thy filthiness from my sight!"

"Aw, shut up!" Kent's broad hands opened and shut menacingly, but the Lebel's muzzle arose with swift, unmistakable intent into line with the American's chest, and the blond prisoner subsided, to follow the orderly out of the blinding glare of the courtyard and into the fetid dampness of the little barracks.

As Kent slunk along at the orderly's heels with a guard standing close behind, his right hand, trembling with the unsteadiness of the habitual drunkard, rose automatically, as though to feel whether the buttons of his blouse were fastened; he had been a smart young soldier once. A bitter grin twisted his darkened features as the groping fingers encountered bare, sweaty flesh instead of trim whipcord.

Tallest of the three, he bent his head as they progressed down the dim, hollowly resounding passage where the air grew thicker and became tinged with the smell of moldy leather and chloride of lime.

Then a low querulous murmur filled the passage.

Suddenly a single voice rose to an agonized scream. "Ah, *Dieu! Dieu!* I die of thirst!" Then it sank again to the level of those other smothered groans.

The orderly in front of Kent shivered visibly and his hand twisted the ends of his long black mustache in nervous anxiety as they passed the short corridor from down which came the moans.

"*Lieber Gott!*" murmured the orderly in a voice that quivered perceptibly. "If this accursed fever gets any worse— Three new cases to-day!" He shook his head dolefully and rapped at the door of the orderly room while Kent halted with the delirious wretch's despairing cry ringing endlessly in his ears.

He straightened automatically as the door opened and the German orderly gruffly told him to enter.

"Wonder what new punishment old Laurier's thought up?" wondered the American as, with wet trousers flapping about his ankles, he passed through the door. "He sure loves to ride me. Maybe he'll give me the works this time and finish it up right. Wonder where I can find a drink?"

He thought with grim pleasure of a certain legionnaire, Hans Nurmer by name, lying in the overcrowded hospital nursing a broken jaw. The fact that Corporal Nurmer had been bullying an unfortunate, slow-witted Dutch boy to the verge of suicide when Kent, drunkenly and forcefully interfered, had made no difference to that worried, hard-eyed officer known as Captain Laurier.

The American had struck an officer, and that, soliloquized Kent, was punishable by death in times of war. The approach of the slave-raiding chieftain, Suleiman, could very conveniently be construed as a state of war should the distracted, fever racked captain decide to remove a trouble-making drunkard. A vision of a white bullet-pitted wall with a firing squad standing rigidly ready in front of it arose in minute detail before Kent's bloodshot eyes.

At a word from the guard Kent shuffled through the orderly room and halted with a clank of fetters before the thumb-marked door of the captain's quarters.

The guard presented arms and stepped back as the orderly waved Kent through the door.

"Shut the door," directed a feeble voice while Kent stood momentarily blinded in the glaring light from a window across the room.

Gradually the American was able to recognize the outline of a man sitting in a bent position over a desk which

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was littered with papers. Kent barely suppressed a cry as the face revealed itself at last. Kent's own features must have shown his amazement, for the captain stiffened.

"Your tact, *soldat* Kent, does you little credit," panted the officer in uncertain accents. "Am I really then so changed?"

"Why—why, no, sir," stammered Kent. "It was the light, sir."

"You lie, *soldat* Kent," stated the officer wearily. "I am changed—I am a dying man." His hand, as it rested among the papers, shook violently, as though with a palsy, and the deep-set gray eyes burned with an unnatural light. "It's the fever. Why do those fat idiots in Paris want this forsaken Territoire Militaire?"

For some moments he mumbled uncertainly under his breath and sat staring fixedly at his hands as though they were something he had never seen before.

"Beg your pardon, sir," croaked Kent—how his throat burned for just a little drink! "Hadn't you better be lying down, sir?"

Quite deliberately Captain Laurier looked the prisoner in the face as though he sought to see something behind those bloated, coarsened features, and he slowly shook his head.

"No, *mon enfant,*" he murmured heavily. "I'm far gone, and there is much to do. Every second before I die"—he drew a shuddering breath—"is precious. I have this *poste*—stand still, *sacré nom du Diable!* You are at attention!" The yellow-faced officer blazed forth in a terrible feverish access of rage. "I ought to have you shot! Of all the worthless, drunken, trouble-making wretches I have ever been condemned to command, you are the worst! You lie, you steal, you're slack, you'd do anything for a drink, you're altogether rotten—" Captain Laurier's sunken eyes gleamed savagely in their sockets. "I ought to have had you shot months ago. You've done nothing but make trouble. Your drunken fights breed discord of the worst kind."

UNDER that blast of scorn Kent's head swayed forward and he passed the tip of his tongue over split, sunburned lips. He swallowed miserably as he realized every word of the indictment was true. A fine end for Roger Kent, cadet captain of his class at the Point!

"Bah!" snarled the figure in the hot, dark blue uniform coat. "I must be mad to think of—" He broke off suddenly and, supporting his weight on his hands, he leaned over the table.

"You, Kent—tell me the truth. God knows it seems impossible, but were you an officer once?" Those gray eyes seemed like bayonet points glinting before Kent's eyes.

Something deep in Kent's alcohol-sodden being arose in rebellion at the biting contempt of that fine-featured Frenchman. His loose lips writhed back as he snarled: "Yes, damn you, I was a damned good one, too! I was on the staff of—"

Then he remembered, and his taut figure relaxed.

"As I thought," muttered Laurier, and he swayed where he sat. "Then I was right. And now, my friend, I'm going to settle you once and for all. Stand aside. Schonblum!" He shouted feebly toward the door. Instantly it was opened and the orderly appeared, an automatic gleaming in his sweaty, dripping hand. "Order a squad with ball ammunition to the wall of the granary."

Kent's heart gave a great leap as he heard the words; so he was to be shot after all. Then he sighed in not unpleasant resignation. Well, that solved the question once and for all; and he was not in the least afraid to die. But it was an inglorious end—not at all what Cadet Captain Kent had foreseen when, with his newly earned commission rustling pleasantly in his suit-

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case, he had started forth to the Staff School in Washington.

Here he was about to be executed for breach of such an elemental thing as the Laws of War! He wriggled his dusty toes and vaguely wondered whether any of his classmates would ever hear of his passing, hear of the miserable end of Cadet Captain Kent. Imagine lying forever in a moldy, dishonored grave beside the pestilential high waters of the Niger. The dregs of his ambition were bitter as gall.

## CHAPTER II.

### "THE POSTE MUST BE HELD!"

AS the footsteps of the orderly died away down the hall outside, Captain Laurier faced the prisoner again and, with a stifled moan, settled wearily back in his roughly fashioned [illegible]

"You heard the order I gave?" he quietly demanded as Kent's eyes at last rose to meet his. "You realize, *soldat* Kent, what that means?" He waited in silence for a reply that did not come. "It means I'm going to have you shot. In a way, I will be doing all that was decent in you a kindness, but—"

"But—" Kent's head, with its mass of shaggy blond hair, raised itself slowly. It was almost with dignity that the derelict spoke. "Why do you torture me like this, *mon capitaine?* Get me shot and have done with it!"

Captain Laurier raised a withered yellow hand that shook like a dead leaf in a winter gale.

"Silence!" he snapped. "I am forced by necessity to give you a chance to redeem yourself. Yes, you!" he said as Kent's eyes widened. "Even you can be redeemed, perhaps. You can't fool me. I've handled too many men during my service in *La Légion.* To my mind you are well born, well educated, and probably were a passable officer once upon a time."

Kent winced at the contempt in that withered aristocrat's face. His every word rang out in that unbearable hot little room like a challenge.

"I find myself soon to die," went on the officer. He spoke heavily and wiped his sweat-covered features. "My Lieutenant Henricot is dead, as you know, from this accursed jungle fever. Gone, too, are the best of my sergeants. The last, Humbert, was sent away trying to find the relief column—I sent him while you snored in drunken stupor in a cell."

Captain Laurier's face contracted spasmodically and a silence fell in which the buzzing of the myriad sticky black flies was clearly audible. Perspiration dark with mud from the river fell from Kent's body with tiny patterings upon the hard earth floor.

With the frenzied gesture of a man who chokes, the captain wrenched open the high, tight collar of his blouse and gasped for breath as he resumed [illegible] account.

"Where the relief column is, only *le bon Dieu* knows—they should have been here a month ago. Wiped out probably by Suleiman's slavers. But as I was saying, I sent Sergeant Humbert to search for them; that was ten days ago. From him I have had no word and he was under orders to return on the sixth day."

Puzzled as to why the commanding officer should explain the dire straits of the garrison in such detail to a condemned man, Kent merely stood in his foul rags, staring, and listened.

"This Suleiman has forces overwhelming in number. Half a thousand men at the least. We have very few. We have no medicines and the garrison dies like cattle of fly sickness; but this *poste* must be held. You have something to say?"

"Yes, sir," replied Kent, and wondered at his own temerity. "Why shouldn't we 'vacuate this rotten fever-ridden hole, retreat to the hills, wait until the relief came up, then reoccupy it?"

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Like long-disused machinery Kent's brain functioned slowly and unwillingly. Snatches and phrases other than the obscenities of drunkenness began to return—the language of officers and gentlemen. Under the dirt, Kent's face burned with sudden color. Captain Laurier stifled a groan, poured a glassful of amber-colored water from an earthenware jar and drained the fluid at a single gulp.

"Aha! So we still can think a little, can we?" His fever-bright eyes rested on the tall prisoner. "But no, we cannot evacuate the *poste*," he continued grimly. "First, because in the open Suleiman Tombohko would annihilate us; and second, because to evacuate the *poste* would throw open the whole Volta valley to him. He would murder and enslave thousands of helpless blacks, disarmed and trusting to us for protection. It would be terrible, horrible—no, *mon enfant*, the *poste* must be held! It is that realization which tortures my last hours."

FROM just outside the window behind Captain Laurier came the rhythmic tramp of marching men, and a double row of flashing bayonet points passed on a level with the sill.

At that sound Kent felt an icy trickle follow the line of his spine—those marching men were the firing squad. In less than five short minutes he, Roger Kent, would be facing the rifles of those hard-featured legionnaires. All former victims of his drunken might, they would welcome his downfall. As from afar the sound of Captain Laurier's voice broke in on the prisoner's thoughts.

"And now, *soldat* Kent," said he gravely, "I am about to make you a proposal. You have just seen that firing squad go by?"

Like a man in a dream Kent nodded his unkempt head a single time.

"I will give you the choice of being shot by them, or—becoming first in command of this *poste!*"

As though the hand of an invisible giant had struck him, Kent rocked on his naked dirty feet until the chain rattled softly. He blinked stupidly and his bruised, swollen features grinned, revealing yellowed, tobacco-stained teeth.

"You like your rotten little joke, don't you, you goddam Frog?" Resentfully he stared at the stern haggard man behind the desk. "If you were half the man you pretend to be, you'd give me a drink and shoot me. Me in command? Ha-ha-ha!" He burst into low hysterical laughter.

Quite deliberately Captain Laurier repeated his astounding offer, while Kent fell silent and in a maze of conflicting emotions, struggled to collect dimmed, befuddled wits. "You're nutty, then," Kent managed to say. "You're sick—delirious, I guess."

"No, I'm not delirious," gasped the figure in dark blue. "I feel what—is for the best. Unfortunately you pen to be the one man of officer cali[illegible] in this *poste*. Degraded as you are, you are still better than the rabble of common legionnaires." He paused in bitter despair. "Ten thousand black lives are in the keeping of the commandant of this *poste*, and the traditions of the Foreign Legion! *Mon Dieu*—that it must all rest on a drunkard!"

Wildly Kent looked about that bare torrid chamber and his hand sought his throat in dreadful perplexity. Had he forgotten so much? Had he followed the line of least resistance too long? Could he make those savage legionnaires obey him? He knew the task was too great.

Captain Laurier from his chair of ebony and rawhide could guess part of the struggle that was going on inside the chained, half-naked prisoner, towering so tall and dark against the whitewashed wall.

"I will disguise nothing," he added with an ironic smile. "The commander of this *poste* will have problems to meet

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in the next few days that would break the heart of a field marshal. The morale is gone—too much heat, monotony and death. The men are on the point of mutiny, the supplies are low and this terrible fever kills men every day. Sultan Suleiman will surround us before dawn to-morrow—but the *poste* must be held."

There was an appeal in the eyes of the courageous dying officer that stirred something deep in the derelict's being. "You, *soldat* Kent, I believe to be the only man who possesses the quality to drive the men and to hold out to the bitter end. The others, Espada and the rest, would haul down *le Tricouleur* and run to save their precious skins. You will help me, no?"

"I—I—aw, hell, sir," stammered Kent helplessly with outheld hands. "I haven't been an officer in years—I can't—I'm no good—I've forgotten anything I ever knew—I could never do it. Make me *commandante* and I'd be drunk in half an hour—I couldn't live without liquor."

Captain Laurier gave a groan that was half a sob and sank slowly forward on the desk top, lying there with his arms sprawled over the papers and his fingers twitching. Kent started forward with a cry of alarm, but as his fingers brushed the officer's coat, the Frenchman managed to straighten up painfully.

"THE flames of hell itself are burning me—I am going fast," he choked. And his face had assumed a ghastly bronze-green tint. "Here is my offer—accept it and I will appoint you *adjutant** of the *poste*. I will appoint you my second in command—before the whole garrison I will do it—I will make myself live that long, until it is done. Dear God! How my head reels! But you must give me your word of honor," he continued, "the word of the gentleman you once were, that"—Laurier steadied himself on the table by a determined effort—"you will not touch a drop of liquor until the *poste* is relieved."

In abject misery Kent stared stonily at his naked toes to keep his equilibrium. Instinctively he knew he couldn't do it. Fight? Yes. Starve? Yes. Die? Gladly. Keep away from liquor? It had been meat, drink and forgetfulness to him for years. Impossible. With a groan wrenched from his soul, Kent shook his head.

"Think again, *soldat* Kent," pleaded the officer. "If not for your own sake, then for the sake of the helpless blacks that we have disarmed, that France has promised to protect—"

It was without doubt the most terrible moment of Roger Kent's misspent life—saving only that day when he had stood up before a court-martial of his peers to be cashiered. Inside his head was a strange jumble of impulses, some urging him to abandon the struggle, others crying out to him to undertake the burden. Then he spoke.

"May I borrow a coin, *M. le Capitaine?*" he begged. Wonderingly, the gray-haired officer produced an Algerian ten-centime piece and passed it over. Placing the copper on his broken, black-rimmed thumbnail, Kent flipped the coin up to the ceiling where, caught by a wandering sunbeam, it flashed redly in its flight. Then the American caught it between his hands, drew a deep breath and bit by bit revealed the surface.

"You see, sir," he muttered thickly, "I haven't enough moral strength left to make a decision—how dare you trust the *poste* to me?"

"I have no choice," gasped Laurier and drank another glass of the muddy-tasting water.

Suddenly Kent stiffened. He drew his big body erect, threw back his sunburned shoulders and saluted briskly—a strange, half-naked figure with a face of a tramp saluting in the manner of a soldier born.

* In the French service the *adjutant* is a noncommissioned officer.

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"Very well, sir," said Roger Kent in a sharp ringing voice that contrasted oddly with the thick uncertain accents of his previous speech. "I'll try, by God! I'll try, and I'll do my best. God knows if I haven't gone too far down—" The thirst was wrenching at his throat as he spoke and sweat not caused by the heat stood out on his forehead in pellucid beads.

## CHAPTER III.

### SULEIMAN'S ARMY.

AN hour afterward the disheartened garrison was, much to its own surprise, paraded in the evening glow.

"Now wot the 'ell?" demanded Jerry of the legionnaire on his left. "Is they abaht to shoot poor old Kent afore the 'ole bloomin' houtfit?"

"Who knows?" replied the other. "But look thou at the gaps in the ranks. Half of the first platoon is gone—Duroche said there were twenty sick of the fever, and there are ten off with Sergeant Humbert. It will be very short and sad when that playful Suleiman arrives," he added as a bugle shrilled "Attention."

A moment later a strange procession appeared from the barracks. In the last red rays of the sun Jerry could see them plainly. First Captain Laurier, his legs wavering under him as two tall orderlies almost carried him forward. Then just behind him strode a tall, broad-shouldered legionnaire whom Jerry at first did not recognize. The cockney started in surprise and smothered an oath of amazement as he saw that the stranger wore the braid of an *adjutant* on either cuff.

"*Sang' de Dieu!*" breathed the bronzed and bearded legionnaire beside Jerry. "Am I gone mad or is it that devil of a drunken American?"

Then Jerry nearly disgraced himself by dropping his piece on parade, and his small blue eyes were round as twin buttons as he recognized that new N. C. O.

"Gawd strike me pink!" was all he could whisper.

Very briefly Captain Laurier appointed Roger Kent as *adjutant* second in command, while the whole garrison watched in incredulous, bitterly resentful amazement. And nowhere was there a deeper scowl than that on the face of Sergeant Manuel Espada.

"*Dios,*" he murmured. "The captain must be delirious to trust the *poste* to a worthless drunkard." And forthwith, his facile brain commenced to attack the problem of removing that ridiculous puppet. The answer was as easy to him as it was to the majority of those hardened characters in the ranks; to them, force was the only answer to any difficult problem.

Loud and heartfelt were the curses that rang up into the evening sky as the garrison fell out and Kent disappeared in company with the stricken captain. The swarms of homing cranes, crows and ibis circled to avoid the uproar, adding their harsh unearthly croaks to the turmoil below.

"May I, Mihail Chetyre, be damned, twice damned and thrice damned if I stay to have my precious gullet slit," declared a grizzled old Russian who, according to rumor, had once been a bank president in Odessa. "Under real officers I'll fight with the best, but under that sodden wine-skin—*Niet!*"

And that was the tenor of most of their remarks.

"Dat captain-man mus' be crazy wid de heat," said Legionnaire Adipose Brule—and scratched the kinky wool on his cranium in childlike perplexity. "Whaffor he want to set pore ol' Kent up? He's much happier drunk—drinkin'est man Ah ever see!"

Jerry regarded the big South Carolina buck with condescension.

"There ain't nothink my pal Kent can't do ef 'e only wants to," stated the little Englishman solemnly. "'E'll myke good, you'll see." And Jerry's

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sharp little face creased in a confident smile with an assurance he in no wise felt.

"What? Dat trash? Him make good?" Legionnaire Brule's enormous mouth opened in a cavernous, contemptuous guffaw. "Yassuh, he'll stay sober when de lil shotes flies 'roun' wid de mockin' birds. Listen to me, white boy. My pappy uster tell me: 'Once a drunk, always a drunk'; an' buhlieve me, pappy, he knew—he died wid a mourner's bench full o' pink baboons an' lavender gy-raffes sitting at de foot of de bed." Legionnaire Adipose swaggered off to mingle with a knot of angry legionnaires clustering about the towering, dominating frame of Sergeant Espada.

"Wait an' see," was Jerry's futile and faint-hearted retort. In the depths of his heart, he, too, doubted that Roger Kent could successfully carry the crushing burden that had fallen on his unprepared shoulders.

JUST after the evening meal, a sullen and disgusted orderly sought out Jerry where he lay motionless on his narrow little cot in the single *chambreé,* where the enlisted personnel of the entire garrison slept.

"Come," growled the messenger. "Our precious *adjutant* is waiting for you." In the rays of the oil lantern he carried, the fellow's gaunt features resembled the face of a famine-struck Rajput Jerry had once seen in India. To-morrow that orderly would be in the fever ward. The little legionnaire shivered.

"Um," thought Jerry as he pulled on a damp white linen shirt, "there's another toff 'eaded fer the 'orspital and the boneyard."

By the dim light of a smoking lamp, the cockney found the newly-created *adjutant* working over a mass of papers, his pen moving rapidly across the paper.

"'Ullo, cocky," said Jerry when they were alone. "Wotcher goin' to do wiv us?"

"Work hell out of you," was the amazing reply. "You're a corporal, by the by. And speak quietly. I believe Captain Laurier has just died—as he lived, as an example to his men."

Even as he spoke, a hollow-eyed medical orderly girt with a dirtied white apron came out of the captain's room and saluted.*

"It's all over, *mon adjutant,*" he murmured in an awed whisper answering Kent's unspoken inquiry.

Silently the new commanding officer nodded. "Go back to the hospital—but wait. How are the sick? Are any of them on the mend?"

"Bad," replied the legionnaire with a discouraged shrug. "They die and die—and there is nothing to do but watch them die. God help us, we have no quinine left—the relief column was to have brought it."

"Stand to attention!" rapped Kent in a tone that made Jerry in the shadows stare in surprise, then automatically stiffen. "No slouching about, even if things are bad. Go back to the hospital and make those poor devils as comfortable as you can."

Then Adjutant Kent got to his feet, went out to the court, and caused the bugler to assemble the garrison. When they stood ranged in silent orderly files, he divided them into reapportioned platoons of equal strength, created temporary N. C. O.'s from the best of them, and addressed them briefly.

"You will obey my orders," he announced crisply, "and obey them cheerfully and implicitly. The first man that questions my orders by deed or voice will be shot."

At that moment there sounded in the distance the report of a single shot. It came from deep in the forest-jungle to the northeast. A thrill like an electric shock ran through Kent as he realized

* In the French Army before the War, N. C. O.'s, as well as commissioned officers, were saluted by privates.

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that the slave-raiding Sultan Suleiman Tombohko was investing the *poste* at last—and the relief column had not come.

"Now, then, *mes enfants,* to your posts!"

Sullenly and with deep suspicion written on their lowering brows, the legionnaires climbed slowly to their posts in time to catch a glimpse of a seemingly endless column of men crossing a meadow which separated the *poste* from the vine-matted jungle. Like a whitish river, silently moving horsemen and footmen crossed the open space to be swallowed up once more in the blackness of the forest. Faintly the snuffle of horses and the rumble of human voices carried up to the demoralized men on the walls.

As Suleiman had intended, the number of the slavers brought despair to the stoutest heart in the garrison. There must have been nearly a thousand men in that column, thought Kent, as he lay flat on the floor of the watchtower and peered through the gathering darkness.

"JUST 'ow many men we got?" queried Jerry. "We'll need every bloke o' the lot and 'is twin to boot, afore this shindy's over."

"Out of the orginal garrison of ninety-eight," whispered Kent, "fifteen have already died of the fever and crocs; ten are off with Sergeant Humbert hunting the relief column; and we've got eleven more in the hospital that have to be counted out."

"Leaves us sixty-three," commented Jerry dismally, and dodged nervously as a large inquisitive fruit bat skimmed by his ears.

"Sixty-two," corrected Kent. He sighed, for his stomach tortured him unrelentingly. "Sixty-two men to stand off at least six hundred—Jerry, I can't see how it can be done."

"Steady on, old son," encouraged Jerry. "Yer'll pull orf the job yet. They's a undisciplined lot o' blighters out yonder."

As the words left the little Englishman's lips, from the nearest wall of the *poste* came a spurt of orange-tinted flame that lit the insect-filled night with brief clarity; and the *képi* leaped from Kent's head as though an invisible hand had snatched it away. With remarkable speed the *adjutant* drew an automatic from the holster belted about his waist. He sighted rapidly at a dark blur crouching on a firing platform below, and fired. As the report died away there followed a coughing grunt, a scream of pain and the sound of a heavy fall mingled with the clattering of a dropped rifle.

"Number one," remarked Kent clearly to the darkness below. "Any other skunk who wants the same dose, step right up!" But silence reigned about the besieged fort, silence pregnant with disaster.

"Jerry," whispered the big man, "this will be a lovely mess if the boys can't shoot better than that. Think of it, missed at twenty yards range—perfectly disgusting shooting! Jerry," he added fiercely, and his frame shook with the intensity of his words, "you can't imagine what I'd give for a drink—just a mouthful! I was a damn fool to take the job. I'll have to have a drink soon or I'll go crazy—"

In the darkness Jerry looked up curiously. "Well, why doncher tyke one—pore old Lauriay 'll never know now."

"I won't just yet—gave my word I wouldn't," muttered Kent thickly. "I'm going to try to stick it out a little longer—till morning anyhow. After that I won't promise."

## CHAPTER IV.

### CHALLENGE.

THE gray, slow-drifting mists were still thick over the Goruol River, and hippopotami in the not very distant fens boomed sleepily, as a single Arab on the back of a plunging white

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horse rode boldly up to the gate of the *poste*. On a short broken branch that still retained a few leaves, the savage-faced emissary carried a square of dirty white cloth. This he waved to and fro. Rising in his stirrups he cried aloud to the curious legionnaires on the wall. He was clad in a blue-and-white-striped *haik**, with a dirtied red *chéchia*—fez—on his shaved skull.

A blue-jowled Italian drew a bead on the center of the rider's chest just where two cartridge bandoleers crossed each other, and gauged the speed of the horse's gallop. He drew a deep breath and was about to squeeze the trigger when a stinging blow on the side of the head interrupted his little test of marksmanship.

"Fool! Ass-born dog!"

The man glanced up furiously, then wilted. Shaking with rage Sergeant Espada stood over the rash legionnaire, his huge fists balled and his eyes glaring at the Italian, lying prostrate.

"Hast thou no wit?" he hissed in an undertone. "Wouldst thou murder Suleiman's messenger? Son of an idiot baboon. By the slaver's good graces we may yet escape with a whole skin the madness of this drunken Americano."

The Italian, glowering, rubbed his cheek, but nodded in comprehension. So that was the way the wind blew! He shrugged and got up again, tortured by an aching head and burning throat.

Kent meanwhile had stalked along the firing platform to the embrasures immediately above the gate.

"No man to shoot," he roared and stood up in plain sight. "Well?"

The emissary, very picturesque in his flowing robes, leaped from his horse with a lithe grace and bowed deeply. Subconsciously Kent noted how the slaver's coal-black skin contrasted with the white stripes of the cloak. Thrice the Arab performed this elaborate salaam.

"To our friends, the *Franzwazi*,"† he began in sonorous tones, "greetings from the mighty Sultan Suleiman Tombohko, ruler of the Damerdhu, Wandala, Bodhal, Niamey—"

"Granted," murmured Jerry with a snigger at the black's pompous pose. "Git on wiv yer."

"For the Lord's sake, shut up!" snarled Kent from the side of his mouth. "Try to show some dignity—half the battle with these niggers is bluffing 'em!"

From the dusty classrooms at West Point whole pages and chapters began to come back—but still his mind would only work with desperate sluggishness.

"To our valued friend, the Sultan Suleiman Tombohko, we send greetings," returned Kent from above the gate. He stood waiting for the emissary's further speech, carefully studying the intelligent black face below. It was not in the least like those of the good-natured negroes back home. The raider's very modern Mauser rifle was glaringly incongruous with the antique dagger that dangled from a wide silver-studded belt of finely woven camel's hair.

"Says the Sultan, he goes into his dominions to gather taxes from his vassals beyond the Goruol. He demands free passage to go and come as he pleases. He brings presents to his white brothers," added the ambassador with a meaning laugh.

For a moment Kent stood silent waiting for the man to finish his speech. The two principals of the parley afforded a strange picture in the growing light of morning. The Arab half-breed below in flowing striped robes, their white tinted pink by the sunrise, his Mauser slung carelessly across his back, and the tall soldier above the gate in the trim blue uniform of the legion's N. C. O. For a long minute they silently took stock of each other.

"Sultan Suleiman Tombohko has

* Robelike outer garment.

† French.

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our permission," replied Kent gravely and with more than a hint of deference, "to come and go as he pleases into the lands beyond the river."

"MY Gawd, Kent!" demanded Jerry, in pained surprise, "yer ain't goin' to let that pack o' bleedin' cutthroats through?" The cockney's expression was tragic as Kent ignored the question to watch the dark face with its forked black beard.

The emissary smiled, broadly showing white even teeth. His hand fluttered from brow to heart. On the walls the legionnaires breathed easier. So the new *adjutant* would listen to reason after all. That's luck—perhaps now they would let him live.

"*Messieurs-les legionnaires* will be well paid for the courtesy," the man promised. Among the assembled legionnaires arose a wondering but satisfied murmur. *Peaudzebie!* Perhaps this American had some sense after all! For all his damned superiority and fine airs he was not above taking a bribe. The hard, brown faces broke into broad smiles, and only Jerry was disconsolate and contemptuous of his friend.

"One moment, *Sidi*," called Kent as the Arab prepared to vault into the saddle once more. "Ere you return to the Sultan your master, there is a detail, an insignificant detail connected with this permission. Sultan Suleiman may freely go across the Goruol, but first, he and his followers will leave behind all arms save only those used in hunting. His vassals are now disarmed, he will not need weapons." Then Kent added a supreme piece of effrontery. "We will guarantee your safety."

Sixty men guaranteeing the safety of a thousand! The emissary started as though a bullet had struck him. He reined his horse with a cruel jerk that threw it back on its haunches and dropped back to earth again. On his savage countenance was an expression of mingled incredulity and rage.

"Fool, art thou mad?" he snarled and his forked black beard quivered. "Suleiman Tombohko does not lay down his arms at the word of the *Franzwazi* dogs. He needs no protection, insolent one!"

A loud murmur of protest broke out from the men along the firing platforms as they realized the trend the parley was taking. *Nom de Dieu!* The drink-addled fool was putting their collective head into the noose after all—or, to be more exact, their bodies into Suleiman's clutches, which was far worse.

"Nevertheless, Suleiman will certainly drop his arms," reiterated Kent quite unruffled, "if he wishes to pass the *poste*. Otherwise, he is at liberty to turn back."

For a moment the black stood immobile, quite speechless with wrath, while his small horse restlessly tossed its long mane, fretting at the delay. Finally the Arab managed to control his ire sufficiently to speak. In a burst of passionate Arabic he heaped curse after curse upon the legionnaires. At last he quieted somewhat.

"Hearken, O *Franzwazi!*" he concluded in a loud voice that carried to all parts of the *poste*. "The warriors of Sultan Suleiman are as the sands of the desert—do not think to thwart him with thy wretched handful."

"Nevertheless," repeated Kent apparently unimpressed, "we have arms and men in plenty. We fear not Sultan Suleiman. Let him surrender his arms and he may pass—"

"*Kelb ibn kelb!*"* shouted the Arab, and leaping on his horse he drew a yataghan and brandished it at the motionless *adjutant*. "When thou liest naked upon the ant heaps, remember that thou hast refused the clemency of the Sultan!"

He shook the curved blade first at Kent, standing above the gate with the first rays of the sun tinting his bloated

* "Dog and son of a dog!"



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cheeks; then at the various embrasures, where the legionnaires were muttering hopelessly and angrily among themselves.

"You shall all perish! *Roumi* swine, you shall feed the kites, and the hyenas shall fight the vultures for thy bones."

Realizing that the emissary's threats were shaking the already discouraged garrison's courage, Kent cut short the parley with an abrupt and imperious command to be off. When the Arab lingered to shout more promises of death and torture, Jerry at Kent's command, sent a bullet whistling over the horseman's *chéchia*.

With a shrill valedictory curse, Suleiman's ambassador thrust his naked feet home in bronze shovel stirrups and galloped off toward the silent green forest at top speed. The thud of those fading hoof beats sounded like a knell in the ears of the fearful legionnaires.

THE tramp of footsteps hastily mounting the ladder which led to the gate top caused Kent to turn in time to see Sergeant Espada, his dark features ominous and furious, followed by half a dozen thoroughly frightened men.

"Fool!" raved the Spaniard, with eyes that glittered with passion. "Thou are mad! Suleiman will assuredly cut all our throats. Call back the emissary while yet there is time."

"*Oui!*" bawled a villainous Marseilles Apache, fingering his bayonet. "This drunken scum of the wine shops has cheated us of gold!"

"And ivory—"

They crowded close, hairy, clawlike hands raised, and voices protesting in half a dozen languages, Kent merely folded his arms and stood still.

"Our case is hopeless," added another whom Kent recognized as La-Touche, one of the more decent men among the legionnaires. "To resist is futile—nay, it is suicide." This he said in an undertone as the chorus of protest rose high to the heavens.

Kent knew that his life and the fate of the *poste* trembled in the balance. Jerry quietly cocked his Lebel rifle and carelessly allowed the muzzle to fall in line with the broad, agitated chest of Sergeant Espada, late of the slums of Agadir and the prisons of the Spanish king.

"Messy bloke," thought Jerry; "'is buttons is dull."

A dreadful doubt seized the American—he couldn't seem to think. In the old days he would have known instinctively how to handle such a situation, but now his brain seemed numb; quite incapable of working smoothly. He realized he must do something—Espada was advancing threateningly and the other legionnaires were gathering menacingly around him like a pack of jackals waiting the signal to spring. Everywhere faces—faces—h o s t i l e, filled with hate.

A fiendish voice kept repeating in his ear: "Let them have their way. It's too hard. Take Suleiman's bribe and let the Arabs through. Gold! Money! Ivory!—*drink!* Forget all this in drink—they'll kill you if you don't!"

The temptation was frightful, overwhelming. It was so long since he had made and won a moral decision of any kind. Great God! How his whole being craved the drink!

He opened his mouth to give the assent. Espada must have read the decision, for the Spaniard's small black eyes on either side of his great beak of a nose lit in triumph. Quite unknown to Kent, Jerry's forefinger curled ready about the trigger. Espada would die the instant he touched Kent. Then, from amid the sour river fog that smelled of crushed marigolds, arose the stern face of Captain Laurier, his dead, sunken eyes terrible.

"Your word, *a d j u t a n t!* Your word," he seemed to say. "The word of an officer and a—"



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*Adjutant* Kent straightened suddenly and his jaw shut with a click as he stepped forward confronting the sputtering Spaniard with a chilling mask of authority.

"Silence! You cowardly dog—stand to attention!"

Manuel Espada never knew why in spite of himself he stiffened to attention. Perhaps it was something in the quality of that command which made him obey. He opened his mouth to protest, but Kent cut him short with a harsh "Silence! To your posts!"

Though the American had not even motioned toward the automatic at his belt, and stood quite alone save for little vigilant Jerry, the pack shifted uneasily under the *adjutant's* baleful glare. One by one the legionnaires sullenly descended the ladder again. Kent watched them go with a contemptuous smile. But as the last malcontent disappeared, he swayed, and Jerry saw great beads of sweat on his brow.

"Sound the *alerté*," he snapped as he found the bugler idly smoking a cigarette in the lee of the south wall. "And if you value your worthless life, pay attention to my orders!"

The sound of the high, clear notes of the bugle call ringing out over the tropic dawn seemed to give Roger Kent a little more assurance, but he felt sick and very unequal to the situation. His stomach tortured him and as he strode along the firing platforms he found he was breathing heavily, and though the dawn chill was yet in the air, perspiration stood out on his brow as though he had been undergoing violent physical exercise.

"HO!" greeted a slovenly Russian, mistaking the *adjutant's* unsteadiness for drunkenness, "see, 'tis our play-acting commandant." He swept his *képi* from his semibald head and bowed in mock deference. "So it pleases your highness to have our throats cut—"

The Russian staggered, reeled sidewise, and fell on his face, senseless and quiet, as Kent, with something of the force that had made him heavyweight champion at the Point smote the mocker on the point of the jaw.

"Throw some water over this insolent dog!" he briefly commanded the men about. "Jump to it! Jacquers, where in hell is the ammunition for this embrasure? Get it!" Without hesitation the man responsible cringed and scuttled off to the magazine.

With an eye that, as long ago, pitilessly detected every piece of negligence, every error of omission or commission, Kent passed along the firing platforms, while the garrison at first responded sullenly, then found itself jumping about as it had not done since Captain Laurier had been taken sick. There was no disobeying that strange N. C. O. who struggled desperately to regain a long-vanished power over men.

Promptly at six in the morning the attack began. From within a distant clump of banyan trees a ragged fusillade was fired.

"Number one," remarked Jerry tersely as a bullet sang through one of the embrasures and struck a legionnaire who had carelessly exposed himself. The fellow uttered a piercing cry and, clapping his hands to a scarlet patch on his throat, rolled from the firing platform and fell to the dusty court below with a heavy thud that sent a chill to the heart of every man present.

"He's not so badly off at that, as we are," grunted the Apache, who was by nature a pessimist.

At each little embrasure crouched a blue-and-white-clad legionnaire, his rifle loaded and ready, a little heap of glistening brass cartridge clips conveniently stacked by his right knee. At regular intervals stood temporary sergeants—appointed by Kent from the steadiest and least worthless of the corporals.

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Below the firing platform were the men detailed to carry the ammunition and to act as a reserve. A small heap of brown ammunition boxes were arranged in the center of the court which was approximately sixty by a hundred feet long.

On the top of the watch tower Kent placed the best shots with instructions to occupy themselves solely with the leaders of the enemy—it had come back to him from the dim pages of the past that untrained fighters were under a severe handicap the instant the directing genius became a casualty.

"Gawd," thought Jerry as he watched with undisguised admiration the effective manner in which the new *adjutant* disposed the men. "'E's beginnin' to get the 'ang of it again." He grinned to himself. "Wot did I tell yer?" He challenged Legionnaire Brule as that dusky individual passed by, bent low under a case of ammunition.

The negro sank to the platform and peered cautiously toward the tangle of rubber vines, tamarind and gambier trees.

"Ah sez agin what Ah sez befo'," grunted the black. "'Mos' anybody kin take de pledge an' las' fo' a day or so— Ah sez as Ah sez befo', 'once a drunk, allus a drunk'! Jes' you wait an' see dat white boy to-morrow. Man, he'll be hittin' dat ole bottle wusser'n ever."

Then from afar a shrill horn sounded, and at once a tom-tom commenced to throb, others joined in until the whole forest boomed and frightened monkeys chattered in noisy terror. Above this was raised a human cry menacing and heart-stilling in its volume. A mighty chorus came from the forest and sent hundreds of birds fluttering wildly against the rose-tinted early morning sky.

"*Lah illah il Allah!*" With the eerie rising inflection of a siren, it swelled. "*Ul-ul-ul-Ullah Akbar!*"

*Bang - boom - boom,* thundered the drums. "Kill! Kill!" their wild rhythm seemed to say.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE ATTACK.

AT their sound Kent seemed to feel a thrill of excitement and apprehension course down his spine. In that mighty uproar there must be at least many hundreds of voices. What kind of fighters were they? God alone knew. He glanced at the scattered figures in blue and white as they crouched in the crenellated shadows of the white mud walls.

"Oh, God!" he groaned to himself. "We can never drive 'em off!"

"Attention!" he shouted from the tower and saw the brown faces of the N. C. O.'s on the firing platform raised skyward. "Fire in volleys! No one to shoot until the bugle sounds. Rodriguez! Send three of your men to the north wall!"

"Gawd!" cried Jerry in a shaken voice. "Look at the bleedin' beggars! There's millions of 'em!" He thrust out a stubby dirty finger, indicating the edge of the forest where a gleaming of white commenced to appear among the bright green of the jungle. It was like the ripple of foam preluding the advance of a gigantic white-crested wave. Everywhere the undergrowth was stirred into mad activity. High overhead half a dozen black dots were wheeling to and fro—the vultures and kites were gathering.

"Steady!" shouted Kent. "Shoot high rather than low." He would have given much to have had the walls of the *poste* ten instead of eight feet high. If a miracle happened and the garrison escaped annihilation, he'd jolly well see to it that they were raised.

Kent's red-rimmed gray eyes could see the attack taking shape—and his lips, now neatly shaved, were not so loose as they had been; they set themselves tensely.

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The wily Suleiman was concentrating his attack from the north with flankers bearing down on the eastern and western walls of the little square-built *poste*. Only the south wall, that which faced the placid Goruol, was unthreatened.

Kent glanced up at the tricolor flapping idly on the bare wood pole. Would it still be there at nightfall? He sincerely doubted it.

Then the first of the slave raiders appeared in full sight. They were stalwart black Haussas, uttering strident war cries and brandishing rifles and spears as they recklessly advanced through grass that was knee-high.

"Um!" remarked Kent tensely, and his mouth was drawn into straight colorless line in the shade of his *képi's* visor. "Lucky they don't seem to care about taking cover. Damn it, but there's a lot of them!"

The bugler who lay beside the *adjutant* merely wet the mouthpiece of his instrument and nodded.

Then hard on the heels of these muscular, half naked foot soldiers appeared the main body of Suleiman's raiders, a great, loose cavalcade riding at a headlong gallop straight at the frail walls of the fort, yelling and firing wildly as they came; enveloped in billowing burnooses, they appeared much larger than they really were.

There were hundreds of them riding little, long-maned horses that reared and plunged with fear and excitement. The level meadow that separated the *poste* from the forest on three sides grew white with those savage black-faced riders and their howling slaves. It was a breath-taking sight, and ever thicker gathered the vultures overhead.

While the legionnaires clutched their Lebels in dogged resignation, the sergeants, too, caught up rifles and moved to empty embrasures, every soul tense for that bugle blast. The galloping men drew dangerously near. Would that strange *adjutant* never give the command? They could see the savage, dark faces of the attackers in detail now: Fula, Haussa, Jekri, Arab—all were there, screaming in barbaric frenzy for the blood of the *Roumi* dogs.

Nearer, ever nearer, surged the attack. Jerry swore feverishly as he saw a sea of black faces, flashing teeth, yellow eyeballs and short black beards—*chéchias* gleaming redly in the light of dawn.

His heart beating like the distant tom-toms, Kent was outwardly cool; he judged the last margin of safety reached, and nudged the bugler who, flat on his back, waited with brazen mouthpiece to his lips.

"NOW!" exclaimed the *adjutant* and snatched up a rifle. The human wave was about to break over the fort as the bugle blared, raucously, hastily.

Its shrill scream was drowned out in a steady rolling crash of rifle fire, resounding from three of the four walls. A tangle of fallen men and horses appeared as by magic. The others, galloping up from behind, could not stop, and crashed into the dead and dying.

The din became indescribable. Loud rang the shouts of the N. C. O.'s directing the firing, and louder yet the shrill yammerings, the piercing shrieks of wounded horses in dreadful chorus. Ceaselessly the rifles of the legionnaires crackled, mowing down the densely packed, charging men in struggling piles.

"Yah!" screamed Jerry, and fired with cool precision. "Tyke that, yer bloody blighters—" He clawed at his belt for a fresh clip, reloaded and shot down a frenzied Haussa who had gained the top of the north wall.

In spite of the deadly galling fire of the legionnaires the charge rushed on, though at diminished momentum. Arab shots commenced to strike along the walls and the gleam of steel appeared perilously near. It seemed the *poste* must be engulfed.

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Kent, from the tower top, had a kaleidoscopic impression of mouthing faces—black, brown, yellow, a few almost white—of billowing robes and shimmering, brandished steel. Now an antiquated flintlock exploded, sending a rain of iron scrap at the defenders, and now a Mauser uttered its staccato bark to hurl a nickel-jacketed bullet *thwack!* against the hard mud walls. The uproar became indescribable. Steadily but completely without intelligent direction—thanks to the marksmen above—the slavers' attack rolled up to the walls themselves, while the veteran legionnaires fired and fired, reloading hastily with metallic snaps of the breech, then cuddling the rifle stocks to their sweating, sunburned cheeks once more. The volley firing became confused and lost as the speed with which the various men reloaded affected the rate of discharge. Unfortunately, a thick smoke cloud from the muzzle-loaded flintlocks, which employed black powder, hung low in the morning chill, masking the ground immediately at the foot of the walls.

"Keep after the leaders," shouted the *adjutant*, and giving the smoke-grimed little Englishman a slap between the shoulder blades he dashed down the ladder and joined the hard-pressed riflemen on the north platform. When he dashed out again into the daylight he almost stumbled across the sprawled body of a legionnaire lying with the shaft of a spear protruding from his breast. Something hummed by Kent's ear with the buzz of an angry wasp as he stooped to retrieve the fallen man's rifle.

"*Les baïonnettes!*" he roared above the crackling shots, and set the example in locking on the long triangular-bladed bayonet of the French infantry, a bayonet which, tapering to a pin-point, makes an excellent lance out of a rifle such as the long-barreled Lebel.

"They come! Help!" roared a deep voice which Kent recognized as that of Espada. "Help us! They gain the wall!" Through the clouds of drifting, acrid-smelling smoke the American could see glimpses of broad steel glimmering along the top of the wall at which the main attack had been aimed.

Courageously enough, the Spanish sergeant and the others had clubbed their rifles and with the reserve legionnaires hurrying to the threatened point they thrust with their bayonets in slow retreat before a mass of howling slavers. The Arabs armed with yataghans, lances and rifles, fought like demons seeking to beat aside those flashing bayonets. It was a decisive moment.

KENT, with new-found acumen, realized it, and, raising a shout of defiance he charged along the parapet to fling himself into that deadly struggle with a savage abandon. His nerves snapping under the strain, and rendered savage by deprivation of alcohol, he felt a species of battle madness come over him. A musket flamed not far from his cheek, nearly splitting his eardrum as he thrust and thrust into that choking smoke cloud—then a grinning, evil face loomed up before him, the tribal scars on its slick black skin standing out in sharp relief. It was a colossal Fula tribesman raising a yataghan.

"Back!" snarled Kent, and thrust with all his might. There was a sudden weight on the end of the Lebel and the Fula vanished.

Kent gave the rifle a savage twist to disengage the blade and turned barely in time to face a shrieking Senegalese who towered head and shoulders above his fellows as he grinned in battle-mad ferocity. He raised a sort of tulwar, and aimed a crushing blow at Kent. Employing a parry learned long ago by the banks of the Hudson, the sweat-blinded, desperate *adjutant* caught the center of the descending blade on the hook which finishes the guard of the bayonet's handle. The steel clashed and the tulwar by the velocity of its own descent was dashed from the

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hands of the Senegalese. Instantly Kent sprang in, driving the steel-shod rifle butt against the black's chin with all his strength. The Senegalese, too, disappeared.

"Stand firm! For God's sake, hold!" he shouted as the decimated, outnumbered legionnaires, staggered by the fierce assault, wavered on the verge of a disastrous defeat.

Then raged a struggle such as the placid Goruol had never before witnessed. From the watch tower Jerry could see that the garrison had succeeded in keeping the slavers from all save the north wall, and had wrought fearful havoc with their famed marksmanship. The half dozen sharpshooters under Jerry deliberately were picking off, one after the other, those tribesmen who seemed by dress or bearing to be leaders.

"Clean th'oo the haid," chuckled Adipose Brule as a tall, gray-bearded rider in a gorgeous green and gold robe toppled sidewise out of the saddle. The negro flipped back his wrist and ejected the shell with a complacent flourish. "Dat makes eight, white boy!"

"Wot's eatin' yer?" demanded Jerry contemptuously as he rolled over to catch up a handful of clips from the pile in the center of the tower top. "Wotcher mean by loafin'? Them niggers ain't 'arf licked yet—look at the beggars!"

He sighted rapidly at the swirl of figures on top of the walls and dropped a sallow *Hajji* from Abyssinia, then a nearly naked Soudanese slave who, with dripping yataghan, had just split the skull of the legionnaire at Kent's right.

"Look at the hadjutant! 'Oo's no good now?" Jerry demanded of Adipose. "Yer carn't expect no more of a man than that!" While reloading he hastily jerked a thumb at Kent, who, side by side with Espada, swung his rifle in a havoc-making arc and by sheer weight of blows was slowly driving back the astonished slavers.

"Dat shore am a fightin' man." mumbled the South Carolina negro. "But jest you wait, white boy—anybody kin fight a man, but booze? Huh-uh!"

ON the firing platform Kent was fighting a double battle—first against the blood-mad followers of Suleiman, and second, against the havoc which sustained drinking had wrought upon a once powerful physique.

"Lord!" he gasped as he felt the strength leaving his arms. "I can't keep 'em back any longer—" It was as though a broad iron band confined his chest making breathing next to impossible. Red-hot pincers seemed to be tearing at his lungs. His body felt dead—leaden. Enviously he watched from the corner of his eye the untiring efforts of Espada who, bareheaded and with his blouse ripped open and splashed with blood, fought like a demon incarnate.

"*Dios!*" panted the Spaniard, and whirled up his long Lebel by the barrel. Three glistening Soudanese slaves appeared on the edge of the wall; elsewhere the horde was falling back sickened and demoralized by the fearfully accurate fire from the walls of the *poste*.

"*Allons!*" Kent panted, and like a battered blue wave the defenders of the north wall rallied and charged along the platform made slippery with the blood and encumbered by the fallen of both sides. In Kent's enfeebled grasp the bayonet barely deflected the foremost slave's powerful thrust, and the edge bit into the *adjutant's* shoulder, searing the flesh like a hot iron, robbing him of the last vestige of strength.

"Let go," every instinct urged him; "you can't fight any more." The whole scene whirled dizzily before his eyes, but with a strange doggedness he brought his bayonet point in line with the black's muscled chest and lunged

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with all his weight. As from a distance he heard a cry like that of a wounded horse, and the rifle was wrenched from his nerveless hands as a swirl of fighting legionnaires pushed by with a panted "*En avant!*" and hurled the last of the attackers from the wall. Kent struggled in the grip of an overpowering nausea such as he had never before suffered.

"I can't stand it," he sobbed, and, abandoning the wall, he stumbled off toward the barracks. "I've got to have a drink—I'll go crazy—I gotta get a drink—I'll fight like hell then!"

As he passed a pile of fallen Haussas, one of the seeming corpses came suddenly to life and, with a poniard bright in his fist, lunged at the reeling N. C. O. as he passed. It would undoubtedly have been Roger Kent's death had not Jerry, from his post on the watch tower, adroitly shot the shammer through the heart just as he poised to strike the unwarned *adjutant*.

Kent gave a startled shout and leaped aside as the Haussa collapsed suddenly almost on his own boot heels. Looking up, he recognized the impudent sweat-streaked face of Jerry.

"Thanks, old-timer," called the American. "I'll remember that to you, my boy."

The burning in his throat reminded Kent of his purpose, and with a vague nod toward Jerry he resumed his progress.

Such legionnaires as were still alive and not desperately wounded were jubilantly firing at the hurriedly retreating enemy, and for the most part did not see Kent slink across the court, peering furtively to and fro as he went.

But up on the tower Adipose guessed the *adjutant's* surrender.

"Looky thar, white boy," he grunted, his yellow eyes still lit with the battle flame. "What did Ah say? Thar goes you-all's hero straight fo' de booze. He sho'-nuff kin lick dem low-down, no-'count niggers, but ag'in' dat red-eye he ain't got no chanst!"

And Jerry, as he realized the truth of that remark, rubbed his shoulder, which was black and blue from the continual recoil of the steel-shod rifle butt, and sorrowed in the depths of his simple, loyal soul.

"Aw, ye're barmy," he insisted, but without an attempt at carrying conviction. "W'en Kent 'e gives 'is word—you'll see." He rolled over to study the groaning mound of dead and wounded that in a wide, varicolored swathe surrounded the *poste*.

"Look! Posie," he called. "See that there bloke in the green nightgown? 'E's shamming!" He fired with the word and saw the prone figure's arms jerk convulsively as the bullet struck. That the man had long been dead he knew very well, but it served to change the subject from Kent's moral surrender, a subject on which Jerry preferred not to dwell.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A FRIGHTFUL DILEMMA.

"I'M goin' get a drink, goddam good drink!" repeated Kent thickly as he entered the passage leading to the orderly room. The thought seemed to give him new strength, and he licked his lips eagerly at the recollection of a certain bottle of cognac he had espied on a shelf in the quarters of Captain Laurier.

"Liquor—good old liquor—makes a man feel human," he whispered, while on dragging feet he stumbled along the passage to the orderly room, the blood from his shoulder wound drawing long red wales on the white plaster as he brushed against first one wall, then the other. He was surprised not to hear the firing growing fainter with the distance; it even rose in volume.

"Shooting a lot," he thought. "They shouldn't waste ammunition.

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We haven't got any to spare, and we may be fighting for a week. I'll get a drink, then stop them." At that moment the firing rose to a rattling crescendo, and Kent halted. "Damn fools," he panted, and halted, resting against the cool white plaster. "They have got no sense. Probably whacking off shots at the wounded—as though all the wounded don't die sooner or later in this climate anyhow. They need a nursemaid!"

With that idea uppermost in his mind, and without quite realizing it, Kent halted, turned uncertainly, and with dragging steps returned toward that bright rectangle of light which marked the end of the passage and the opening into the courtyard.

"Lot o' damned children," he repeated angrily. "Waste all their shot—"

Though his throat burned like a lime kiln, he halted when he emerged once more into the sunlight, which was commencing to take on the true intensity of the tropic day, and put a whistle to his lips. He made a wild figure—powder-grimed, hatless, blond hair fallen over his bloodshot eyes, trembling with exhaustion and craving, his white trousers splashed with gore.

"Cease firing!" he croaked, while his eyes ranged along the firing platforms. The farther he looked, the colder grew the chill in his heart. He had not dreamed so many of the blue and white figures lay sprawled and motionless. They lay everywhere, in all manner of fantastic poses, just as the metal spray of scatter-guns and the lonely modern bullets had dropped them.

Here an arm dangled pathetically helpless over the edge of the platform; there was a legionnaire slumped on his knees behind his embrasure as though in prayer. Everywhere were wounded, moaning men in blue. All the enemy within the walls were dead—red bayonets in the hands of Espada and his followers explained the absence of wounded.

"They are gone?" Kent demanded of a yellow-faced Brazilian corporal who was jerking tight the knot of a sling which supported a shattered left arm.

"*Si,* they are gone," replied the wounded man, and his teeth gleamed white as he bit to pull the knot tighter. "And so are most of us. One more attack—and then, *pouf!*" He blew out his cheeks with a macabre grimace, jerking the thumb of his uninjured hand at a long row of men lying under the east platform. How big the soles of their shoes appeared! The hobnails on them gleamed dully in the sun.

Then a shrill voice commenced to sing, high up on the top of the tower; it was strictly improvised verse, containing grave errors as to rhythm and tune, but it came as a pæan of triumph which held a note of hysteria:

*"And pore old Suleiman is a Silly Man now—*
*Sixty little legendaries tort 'im 'ow;*
*'E thort 'is second nyme was fighter,*
*But sixty Roumis spelled it blighter,*
*And pore old Suleimann's Silly Man now."*

"Good boy, Jerry," murmured Kent as the cockney concluded his epic. He took a long pull at the water bottle of a legionnaire who would need it no more, and then called a conference of such N. C. O.'s as had survived that appallingly sanguinary struggle.

SUPPORTING himself on a rifle, and with the blood from his wound trickling in a diminished stream down his sleeve, Kent picked up a *képi,* pushed it back on his head, and viewed the half dozen grim fighters who answered the summons. Silently he watched them come picking their way over the fallen, while the black shadows of the vultures floated across the sunlit court.

There was, first of all, Sergeant Espada, bloodied and scowling; then

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there was yellow-faced Corporal Vassos, the Brazilian, his hairless saturnine features grinning triumphantly as he exhibited a bullet hole in the crown of his red and blue *képi;* the veteran Corporal LaTouche, wearing a rag twisted about the base of his grizzled hair, where a lance had grazed him; there were one or two others, trustworthy men.

Very quickly Kent checked the casualties and was appalled to find that of the sixty sound men who had begun the engagement, only some thirty were still able to stand on their feet.

"And of these," concluded LaTouche, "two have body wounds—they'll last a day, perhaps two, poor devils."

"None of us will last two days, thanks to good Señor Kent," broke in Espada furiously. "And we'd all be alive if he had accepted the offer of Suleiman."

"Silence!" snapped Kent, and fixed the rebellious one with bloodshot eye. "Another word from you, Sergeant Espada, and I'll shoot your worthless head from your body. It's lamentable that a man who can fight as you have just now fought hasn't the loyalty of a toad. LaTouche!"

The old Frenchman jumped to attention.

"From this moment you are my second in command. Count the dead and make a report of the wounded. You, Sergeant Espada, superintend the distribution of fresh ammunition; warn all men not to waste a shot. Let the vultures and kites alone; we'll need all their help."

And again Kent bitterly lamented the non-appearance of the relief column.

With them was expected a fresh supply of ammunition. The present garrison had been isolated for some eight months, during which period a large amount of ammunition had been expended in the course of patrol duty and target practice.

Under normal conditions what was left in the magazine would have been an ample supply, but where Suleiman Tombohko went on foray conditions were far from normal.

"Who is this Suleiman?" asked Kent of LaTouche, as they endlessly studied the edge of the forest from the tower.

"An extraordinary type," replied the veteran, and stooped to retie his boot lace. "It is said this able gentleman is the son of an Englishman and a Bedouin mother. His father died when Suleiman was yet very young; as a result he became an Arab of the Arabs, bitterly hating his white blood."

"Oh, I see," replied Kent, without turning his head. "But it's a wonder he hasn't learned something about modern fighting. Frontal attacks on fortified posts have been out of date for a good many years."

LaTouche shrugged, and his shadow on the blood-stained boards behind the embrasure mimicked the motion. "It would appear that our good Suleiman doesn't need to learn," observed the veteran, uttering a sigh and giving a significant glance about the dangerously undermanned wall. There was a legionnaire crouching at every fourth embrasure; formerly they had occupied every other one.

"His business for tens of years has been to raid the lands of the Upper Volta for slaves—slaves which he sells in Abyssinia, Arabia and all over Africa. I am told it is a trade that pays well."

A puff of wind from the little meadow before the *poste* brought an odor faint as yet, but incredibly nauseating, and set the weary men behind the walls to wrinkling their noses and swearing.

"Curse the luck!" snarled one. "The dead are but a few hours old—what a bouquet there will be to-morrow!"

Already the ground was black with

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rending carrion birds, their horrible red bald heads bright in the sun.

SICKENED, Kent divided the survivors of the garrison into two platoons, one of which was always on the walls, ceaselessly ready to give the alarm should Suleiman's cohorts advance again. He then superintended the digging of a huge hole beneath the stones of the floor of the courtyard, wisely placing it as far as possible from the well that supplied the *poste* with water.

In this were laid the dead—German, Pole, Swede, and Portuguese—side by side, all nationality lost in that democracy of death. Then the panting, sullen-eyed laborers sprinkled lime thickly. The diggers then shoveled earth furiously, for the flies circled in hungry, loathsome swarms. It was depressing, back-breaking work.

Toward dusk it appeared that the sagacious Suleiman had adopted a new type of offensive, for from the shelter of the dense baobab thickets and from the lofty mahogany trees of the forest rifles commenced to snap at everything that showed above the walls.

"Snipers' war," commented Jerry, as he got up from a mess-kit of hastily concocted soup and prepared to return to the tower top. "It's a narsty, tiresome gyme—we useter plye it with the bleedin' Pathans back in Hinja. But I hain't yet see the nigger wot could outshoot a real—legendary." And that last word neatly spiked the ire of Legionnaire Adipose Brule, who had risen in sable majesty to obliterate the little cockney.

"Boy, howdy," he sniffed, "but them daiders do stink," he remarked as he picked up his rifle. "Expect they'll have mo' to say as time go on—unless the buzzards polishes 'em off."

"Yus," agreed Jerry, with a thoughtful frown. "Once hup near the Afghan frontier we had some the like o' these—limburger was violets to 'em." He forebore to mention the pestilence that had resulted from the presence of those same dead Afghans.

"Why myke the boys dahn-'earted?" he asked himself. "Gawd knows we got troubles enough." And what he said was no less than the truth.

FOR two interminable days an intermittent struggle went on. Days during which the garrison suffered and swore and watched the fever, aided by the putrefying corpses beyond the wall, make further inroads among the pitifully diminished garrison.

There was nothing to be done, for medicines of all kinds had long since been exhausted.

The air was thick with the poisonous reek in which the vultures flopped and fluttered by day and hyenas chortled and snarled by night. Twice in the long night hours had the garrison flown to arms at the sound of heavy trampling through the underbrush—but it was only a wandering herd of elephants seeking the fresh green grass at the water's edge.

"Where in hell is that column?" demanded Kent savagely, as the twilight of the third day of the siege deepened. "I wonder if Humbert ever found them? Dirty rotters to let us die like this."

"Gawd, matey," murmured a haggard, discouraged Jerry, "they must orl be dead—maybe yer should 'ave tyken old Solomon's offer. We carn't larst much longer, wot I fink. The food's abaht gone."

Kent lifted a face that showed in detail the agony he had endured for the last three days—days that had for him been species of torture more refined than the imaginations of Suleiman's tribesmen could ever have devised.

There were times when his sanity wavered on the brink—times when he half pulled out the automatic at his

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belt to end a life too miserable to endure. There were times when in the darkness tears of craving had coursed down his cheeks in streams.

"God knows how, but we must hold on," replied the *adjutant,* and passed a hand over his dirty, unshaved chin. "We can't let those devils through to capture and massacre the helpless niggers under our protection." His eyes were clearer now, but there was a tragic light in them. "Jerry, you can't know what this staying off liquor is. It's—it's killing me." Abruptly he turned away.

At that moment came the distant blast of a horn of some kind, and a voice hailed the alert sentries from the outer darkness:

"A truce, O *Franzwazi,*" called the invisible messenger. "I bring word from the Sultan!"

Kent raised his head cautiously above the line of the parapet. "I will speak with but one man," he shouted. "Any others will be shot!"

There was the sound of bare feet shuffling over the grass, then a muttered exclamation of disgust as the wind, veering, brought that fearful stench down upon the visitor. Slinking, doglike forms whimpered and vanished among the grasses at his approach, reluctantly abandoning their feast.

"Stand ready," warned Kent, and sent runners to awaken those men who slept the sleep of the exhausted in the malodorous barracks. "This may be a feint."

"I would speak with the chief of *Franzwazi,*" announced the Arab messenger boldly. "I have word for his ear."

Then Kent made a serious mistake; Jerry and LaTouche saw the error at once.

"'E should talk to 'im in private," whispered the cockney, with a dubious shake of his small head. "'E shouldn't let old Espada and Vassos an' the rest 'ear wot's said."

"You are quite right," agreed LaTouche. "*Monsieur l'Adjutant* is making a mistake of the most grave."

In the damp night stillness every word of the conversation that followed could be heard from one end of the *poste* to the other. With fierce, hopeful ears, the garrison listened with beating hearts for any sort of terms granting them a new lease on lives that seemed to be inevitably forfeited.

Less than twenty men of the small war-worn garrison were now left—five men to a wall fifty feet long.

"The *Franzwazi* are few—"

"Nay, we are many!" retorted Kent brazenly, the darkness hiding the anguish on his sunken features. "Many, strong and well-armed."

"Wot a liar!" Jerry was deeply pained; even he saw the futility of further resistance.

THE messenger shifted his position and white robes glimmered in the light which preluded the rising of the moon. "Nevertheless, the *Franzwazi* lie in the palm of the great Suleiman's hand. He has but to close that hand and ye will be but passing shadows."

"When Suleiman last closed that same hand," reminded Kent, in halting Arabic, "he got naught but very bloody fingers. Do not the voices of your dead tribesmen speak loud enough?"

"*Sacré baptême,*" growled LaTouche from the shadows. "If those voices speak any louder I shall go mad!"

Momentarily nonplused by this rather obvious piece of defiance and logic, the emissary shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. He had not expected anything but an overwhelming eagerness to surrender on any terms Suleiman might choose to offer. Kent stiffened as he heard the sounds of some one silently passing along the platform on the opposite side to that on which he stood—

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passing around to gain a place at his back.

He glanced at Sergeant Espada, standing huge and silent near by, in pose that suggested anything but quiet resignation, with his hand put in the folds of his overcoat.

"Hearken, O chief of the *Franzwazi*," resumed the man below the wall. "Only yesterday did our great Sultan surprise and destroy a great body of the *Roumis*—dressed as you are dressed. He smote them with the might of his arm and by the hundred they fell. But a few remain as captives and slaves of his slaves."

It seemed as though a hand made of ice had gripped Kent's heart, wringing the blood from it and leaving it hard and dead. Everywhere along the walls did uneasy murmurs break out. Furiously Kent thought for a parry.

"It is as easy for me to lie as for Suleiman," said he coldly. "Go back!"

"Nay!" the Arab's voice rang out triumphantly. "Suleiman l i e s not; hearken to his words."

Inside the doomed *poste* complete silence reigned, save for the heart-breaking moans of the wretches wasting away from the fever. Every man's consciousness was trained upon that swart emissary's next words.

"To-morrow, with the coming of the sun, you shall see the captives—"

This time Kent's heart sank and his wan face fell into an expression such as might have been seen on that of the Roman Varus when he saw his legions trapped.

"Saith Suleiman, the brave and wise in council: I will give these captive *Franzwazi* their lives, together with their freedom; I will give each man among the *Franzwazi* in the fort of mud two tusks of ivory."

The dimly seen Arab paused to let the full effect of the offer sink into those death-facing legionnaires on the walls. "To each of them I will also give a bag of gold, and to the chief of the *Franzwazi* a kettle filled with red British gold pieces." As Kent, faced with despair, remained silent, the Arab offered yet another inducement. "The *Roumis* are brave warriors; I shall let them keep their arms."

There spoke the crafty Suleiman, thought Kent; he was no mean diplomat. In the darkness behind he could hear the mutterings and whisperings of the legionnaires.

"And if we refuse?"

The messenger paused as though astounded that the idea had ever occurred to the beleaguered white men.

"Then, O fools, ye—die. Die in such a fashion that your children's children will speak of your deaths in whispers."

"What else?" demanded Kent, and felt the oppressive darkness crushing him.

"Two days," called the Arab, "will Suleiman give for the decision, then on the dawn of the third day—Jehannum will gape before the eyes of the unbelievers."

Again Kent was moved to admiration for the astute Sultan's tactics. It was nothing short of genius to allow those two days of grace—two days during which dissension might breed and spread among the hard-pressed garrison.

"In the light of to-morrow's sun will Suleiman show the prisoners—before the fort will he march them. To-morrow noon, if ye have not agreed, they die."

"Go back to your master," said Kent sharply. "Go, and I will give ye my answer when we have seen the prisoners—"

"Rather, *we* will give ours," murmured the Spanish N. C. O. beneath his breath.

"*Inshallah*," replied the emissary, and quickly withdrew, leaving Kent to face the dark-browed legionnaires and a terrible decision at the same time.

**TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK.**

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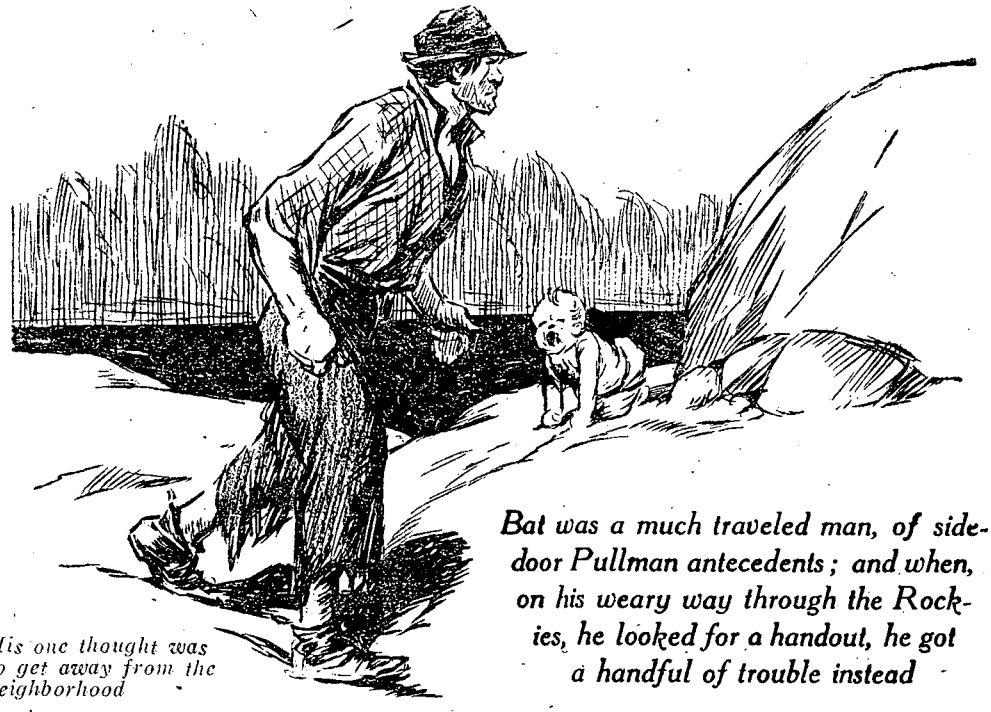
# Battling Bilbo's Baby

**By CARL CLAUSEN**



*His one thought was to get away from the neighborhood*

***Bat was a much traveled man, of side-door Pullman antecedents; and when, on his weary way through the Rockies, he looked for a handout, he got a handful of trouble instead***

MR. BATTLING BILBO, young knight of the highway and the railway, was out for a walk. Some time during the preceding night he had been kicked off a slow freight, puffing up a steep desert grade at its minimum speed. He had landed literally on his ear, and that slightly cauliflowered left member still tingled from its violent contact with the hardpan.

The sun had been viciously hot. The soles of Bat's oxfords had not been designed for ordeal by fire. The creosote seasoning in which the hardwood ties had been dipped to discourage desert rodents from shredding them, had brought to Bat's reluctant nostrils certain painful memories of a doctor and two nurses picking No. O buckshot from between his shoulder blades, some years earlier, because he had turned his back too soon on a member of the rival East St. Louis clan.

Wearily he paused on a slight rise in the right-of-way of the D. & T. Railroad, where the narrow-gauge track loped over a spur of lava rocks before dropping into the sodium meadows of Saline County.

From his seat on an outcropping ledge he surveyed the terrain through which the railroad track wound itself after leaving the spur of rocks. It was not sylvan. Cactus alternated with the telephone of the Desert & Tidewater as the predominant flora of the sandy waste.

To the west rose the black bastions of the Sepulchre range. He had heard that an old Indian trail led through a bowlder-strewn rift of these mountains



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to the orange groves of Southern California, via Inyo and Kern counties, a little-traveled path where men's whereabouts were of no moment, and their antecedents and destination of less.

He decided to take this trail since it seemed to offer a shortcut to his itinerary to the Pacific coast. It would also enable him to avoid the corporate limits of Saltpeter, the county seat, and his difficulties with the authorities of Alkali, the adjoining county, made a detour highly advisable. He knew that in spite of the rivalry that existed between the officials of bordering commonwealths, their attitude toward knights of the road were unanimously unsympathetic.

He found it rough traveling after leaving the right-of-way, but he had plenty of time. At dusk he killed a jack rabbit with a lucky stone. He skinned it and roasted it over a slow fire before he turned in. The night was moonless and the sky peppered with stars, but as he was not interested in stellar phenomena except such as are produced by the concussion of a six ounce boxing glove, he turned his coat collar about his ears and curled up by the fire.

With the exception of once or twice, when he rose on his elbow to shy a stone at an inquisitive coyote, he slept fairly well, awoke refreshed, and made an early start.

He trudged along a dry creek bed that had its source among the granite buttresses of the Sepulchres, and that carried a large assortment of samples to prove it. They were of every shape (except round) from triangular to thirty-two facets, and they ate an eighth of an inch off the soles of his shoes every four miles. By noon his feet were scalded lobster red, and by evening he felt as if he were walking a spiked fence with half a hundredweight balanced in each hand. He did not know the paradox of the Hot Lands, which makes it imperative for pedestrians to wear heavy woolen socks to keep the feet cool.

TOWARD sundown he flung himself beside a small, deep pool in the shade of a bowlder, and shook his feet out of their leather casings, with the hesitancy of a housewife removing a mold from a quart of doubtful jelly. Immersing his blistered extremities in the lukewarm water, he aired his opinions on all geological strata, hurling flocks of invectives at any substance of greater density than calf's liver. The steel-blue ramparts flung back the echoes of his jeremiad He overlooked no formation from Gibraltar to gallstones.

Presently he became aware of having competition. At first he had thought it was merely the tired echo of his last malediction folding its wings, but as he listened there came to his ears a sound that could never have had its origin in his own vocal chords, unless it had been delayed some twenty odd years in transit.

Hoisting himself to his knees, he peered over the bowlder. Directly below him sat a very small child, telling the world in a crescendo what a hard place it was, and emphasizing its remarks by flailing the sand with a pair of determined fists. It was dressed in one of those simple garments that has created a market for eight cylinder sport roadsters and Russian wolfhounds among the descendants of safety-pin manufacturers.

Bat shifted his weight from one knee to the other and glanced about for the sign of the lair of this vocal berserker, but saw none. He waited, then leaned over the bowlder and said:

"'Smatter, Bub? Lost yer milk strainer?"

The youngster fetched up on G sharp and stared at him. Seeming not at all alarmed, merely annoyed at the interruption, it inflated its chest like an army blimp going into action, and backed down the chromatic scale.

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Bat clapped his hands to his ears. He was torn between the urgent necessity of securing a meal from the parent of the infant, and the preservation of his eardrums by removing himself from the vicinity. While he was debating what course to pursue, if any, the youngster came crawling around the corner of the bowlder. It stopped and regarded him with the solemn concentration of having a new desert specimen presented to it for classification.

"No, no, mussen eat dirt!" it said gravely, evidently voicing some parental sentiment, for it immediately proceeded to nullify the admonition by stuffing its mouth full of sand.

"Have yer own way, Bub," said Bat, reaching for his right shoe. While he was easing his foot into it and lacing it, the child filled the left one with pebbles and shunted it down the steep incline and into the pool, where it sank by the stern before Bat could prevent it.

"Now look wot ye went an' did!" he shouted.

The youngster waved its arms windmill fashion and pointed excitedly to the cluster of bubbles marked X.

"Ooh!" it gurgled. "Pitty shoe make bubbo!"

With baleful eyes, Mr. Bilbo watched the boot come to rest on the bottom of the pool. His first impulse was to heave the youngster after it, but the certainty that its mother would answer its last gurgling cry of distress, and rescue it, restrained him. The pool was eight feet deep, and Bat was five feet six and three-quarters inches tall. He looked about for some sort of a pole, but there wasn't any.

There was manifestly only one thing to do—dive for the boot. Sourly he divested himself of his garments and put them, one by one, atop of the bowlder out of the child's reach, then eased himself into the water, feet first. He submerged unsuccessfully, again and again. The youngster seemed to regard Bat's aquatics as a special benefit performance, and indicated its criticism of his dramatic abilities by hurling handfuls of pebbles at his head every time he came up for air.

Finally he managed to hook one groping finger into the laces of the scuttled buskin, and hoisted himself ashore. Instant disapproval met this procedure The child drew its face askew. Its lower lip quivered piteously.

"NO, no, pitty mans play some mo'!" it whimpered.

Bat stepped into his trousers with a snort.

"Go soak yer head!" he said in heartfelt tones.

The invitation was greeted with a howl of rage. Bat donned the rest of the garments hastily. His one thought was to get away from the neighborhood as quickly as his tender feet would carry him.

He had not gone more than three hundred yards when, beyond a bend in the trail, he came upon a small habitation, half tent and half dugout, plastered against the hillside like a swallow's nest. At the ridge pole stood an assortment of prospectors' tools, a pick and shovel, a rusted tin pan and a sledge hammer. A half-strangled female goat stood brooding over a mesquite stump, about which its tether was wound tightly. It regarded Mr. Bilbo darkly out of the corner of one bloodshot eye as if to blame him for its predicament.

The hillside in front of the dugout sloped abruptly into the cañon. Bat made a wide circle about the goat and knocked timidly on the ridge pole. The answer was a moan of undoubted male origin. Reassured, but at the same time vaguely uneasy, he knocked again. A deep-throated, "Come in," responded.

It was more like the dark den of some animal than an abode of humans. The farthest end of the room was simply a shallow cave hewn out of the

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pristine rocks. Against the wall stood a rude child's crib, fashioned of saplings bound together with rawhide thongs, and beside it a chair made of the same materials. There was a stove of sorts, built of adobe bricks, and vented by a stovepipe of old beef cans, fitted end to end, and fastened together with baling wire.

On a pallet of brush in the farthest and darkest end of the room lay an old man. His white hair and beard showed in the gloom like a gigantic snowball.

Bat, blinking his sun-blinded eyes, inquired what the chances were of getting a meal.

"Best in the world, stranger," was the answer, "there's grub enough to last a month after I'm gone. Sit down."

Bat pondered over this cryptic remark as he eased himself into the homemade Cogswell.

"Traveling?" the old man inquired.

"Yeah," said Mr. Bilbo.

"Run into Evangeline along the trail?"

"Meaning the kid? Yep, I bumped inter 'er."

"I was getting worrit about her," his host said. "Thought maybe she'd went and chewed some loco. She's always eating things." He fastened a pair of fever-bright eyes on Bat. "Lucky you dropped in. Hate to hop the twig alone, and somebody's got to lug Vangy on the outside."

Mr. Bilbo gripped the arms of the chair.

"Yer mean ye're fixin' to croak?" he asked.

"Reckon I am."

"Not with me sittin' here!" said Bat in consternation.

"Like to see you stop me, stranger!" he said with a weak smile. "I'm free, white and ninety-two!"

Bat had risen to his feet. He glanced about the gloomy chamber with a shiver. Superstition had driven away the pangs of hunger.

"Kin I git yer a drink of water before I go?" Bat asked vaguely. In the movies the hero always called for a drink before he fooled you by not dying.

"Thought you said you wanted something to eat?"

"I'm in a hurry," said Bat.

The oldster raised himself upon his left elbow and looked his visitor over.

"What did you kill? A coupla deputies?" he wanted to know.

"I didn't kill nobody," Bat retorted shortly, turning to go.

THE old man put forth a restraining hand.

"Better get something under your belt before you take the trail again," he advised. "It's forty miles to Tortilla, the nearest town. You'll find some sourdough and canned mule in the box by the stove."

Bat's eyes traveled doubtfully to the receptacle indicated. Hunger and superstition struggled within him, and superstition went to the mat. The old man went on:

"If it wasn't for Vangy, I wouldn't bother you, stranger; but I can't let a two-year-old go maverick on the range."

Mr. Bilbo looked up from his task of broaching a five-pound can of mule with the hatchet. He had not the faintest idea of what a maverick might be, but he agreed that such a course was unwise.

"Her mother passed in her checks nine, ten months back," his host said. "She was marrit to a no-'count desert rat, with popeyes and a silver claim up the crick, two, three miles. This hombre, he comes lugging the kid and leading Marian—that's the goat—by ten feet of clothesline, 'bout a week after his woman dies, and axes me will I look after the pair of them while he goes to Tortilla for grub.

"I don't like the look in his eye, and I ain't never shook hands with no goat before, but I agrees with some plentiful misgivings, all of which



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proves correct, for he keeps going and I'm holding the kid. She was a mite over a year old then, and I have my hands full herding her and cruising feed for Marian, who threatens to vote dry, local option, if I don't import some alfalfa."

Mr. Bilbo pried a section of meat from the can with his fork. "Goats an' wimmen is aggervatin'," he agreed sympathetically.

"I gets mighty fond of the youngster and I'm beginning to hope her pop-eyed parent forgets the way back, which he does, and me and Evangeline go to housekeeping permanent. I makes her that crib and sits up nights herding skeeters from off her, and figuring shall I let her roll her own, and pluck her eyebrows in a de-cade."

"In a de-cade!" Bat snorted. "I seen 'em do it right in public!"

"Well, we get along right fine for nine-ten months, when a coupla four-plus freaks from Los Angeles comes up the trail and offers me ten thousand dollars for the claim. One of them unscrews a fountain pen and fans me with a check, but, says I, big bills or nothing."

Mr. Bilbo nodded.

"Yeah," he concurred heartily, "checks is de bunk!" He was thinking of an unfortunate incident in the Windy City when he had switched bags with a bank messenger in a Dearborn Street dairy lunch, and had found it to contain a hatful of drafts.

"Well, the two golfers rides down the cañon on their bob-tailed cayuses, mad as hatters; and in about a week they're back and pokes two five-thousand-dollar bills at me, which they've coaxed from their banker. 'You wanted big bills,' says one of them, an important penguin with the curvature of the shanks, 'here they are,' Well, the plasters look authentic, so I signs an agreement to pull stakes in thirty days, and the two go to Tortilla to record the deed. That's about a week ago, and I was fixing to take the trail for the coast with Evangeline when I gets took in my right side. I have a spell of misery in my bones, now and then, which is only natural, seeing as how they kept me in the perpendicular for over ninety years, so I don't pay no attention to it the first day or so, but it gets worse, and it's all I can do to coax a schooner of milk from Marian with my left hand, and crawl crab-wise down the crick to fill the water canteen. It looks like I'm not going to get a chance to bust the two fives, and yesterday I can't move offa this bed, and the kid's running maverick."

MR. BILBO was engaged in transferring a large segment of meat from the can to his mouth. The fork remained poised in mid-air.

"Yer mean yer got dem five-grand —here?" he asked huskily.

"Sure—and a gun that shoots ambidextrous," his host added with a suggestive movement of his left hand under the blankets.

Bat drew a deep breath.

"Gimme a rod with a safety catch," he said loftily, "I don't like dem Western makes."

His host regarded him in silence for some moments from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"You've got an honest face," he said presently. "Anyway," he added as an afterthought, "if you double-crosses me and Vangy, I'll haunt you for the rest of your days."

Mr. Bilbo blushed. His features had been commented upon before, and photographic records of them were kept in several cities in the Middle West, but not for sentimental reasons. One case especially grieved him. It had been a small matter of common assault. A citizen of standing had been found lying in a vacant lot behind a billboard. Mr. Bilbo had been in the horrible position of having an iron-clad alibi, and being unable to use it. At the moment when the citizen was



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slugged behind the ear, Bat was engaged in a highly successful assault upon the safe of a kosher delicatessen in a city thirty miles distant.

Bat glanced uneasily at the white head wagging at him from the dark corner. His mouth was too full to utter a fitting acknowledgment of the dubious compliment, and the reference to ghosts had taken the wind out of his sails. Like all gentlemen of his profession he was superstitious to the point of fatuity.

"I don't see no way out of trusting you," his host resumed, with a slight accent of regret. "Nobody's likely to come up the trail for a coupla weeks. All I ask you to do is to plant me decent under half a ton or so of tailings, so's the coyotes won't scatter me up and down the crick, and then lug the kid to tidewater. I got a friend in Hollywood, whose dad I grubstaked on the Sacramento back in '49. He's making unspeakable drammer with a megaphone, but his heart's in the left side. You're to hand Vangy over to him."

Mr. Bilbo all but choked on the proposition.

"Does I look like a passel post?" he demanded. "Be yer age, grampa!"

The old man reached under the pillow and drew out a Bible, which he handed to Bat. Mr. Bilbo glanced at it with a puzzled frown. He had encountered one before in a hotel bedroom, and had thought it some sort of a directory, but as none of his acquaintances had permanent addresses, he had taken no interest in it. He turned the book over in his hand and was about to lay it down with an appropriate retort, when the old miner poked a revolver from under the blankets, and pointed the weapon at him, somewhat unsteadily, but with unmistakable intent.

"Put your left mitt on the Good Book, and raise your right!" he ordered. "A mite higher! That's better! Now, swear by the mother that bore you that you'll take Vangy to tidewater and see that no harm comes to her!"

Mr. Bilbo sucked his breath in sharply. His maternal ancestor had left him in the bottom half of a telescope suitcase on the top step of the precinct police station, and the officers had been looking for her earnestly ever since. But his face turned pale. The revolver was the long-barrelled forty-five type that had written Western history in epitaphs.

"I ain't got no mudder!" he stammered.

"All right, pick your own relatives," said his host, "and throw in a coupla second cousins for good measure, and remember, I'll climb your family tree and haunt every limb of it if you let me and Vangy down!"

At his prompting Bat was forced to take an oath, which an inquisitor's apprentice would have given ten years of his life to carry into effect. This accomplished, the old man drew out a sealed envelope.

"Here's a letter for you to give to my pal's son. His address is on the outside. You'll find the two fives on the bottom of the flour bin, behind you. One of them you're to turn over to him, to hold in trust for Vangy. The other one's yours for the trouble. Now, get busy. It's time to milk Marian."

"Who—me?" said Bat in alarm.

"Sure, you! A course in dairying will soften your hands for the job of handling the kid, and you'll keep apart from that flour bin until you've graduated with a quart of milk. Go down the trail and round up Evangeline!"

As if in answer to his order the youngster appeared in the doorway. She hoisted herself to her feet by the ridge pole, and stood blinking her eyes in the bright sunlight. A beatific smile illuminated her grubby features at recognizing her aquatic playmate.

"Vangy want pitty shoe make bubbo!" she said.

Bat picked up the milk pail with a

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curse and went out to scrape acquaintance with Marian, the morose.

SOME three days later, Mr. Bilbo was seated upon a bowlder in the shade of the dugout, fanning himself with an aluminium kettle cover. Evangeline, the irrepressible was asleep in her crib for the nonce, and Marian was whetting her horns on the mesquite stump for some dark purpose of her own.

Bat glanced tenderly at his feet. For three painful days he had hobbled about with them swathed in gunny sacks, which he had just removed for the first time. He was in a sour mood, torn between cupidity, superstition, and lack of transportation facilities. He was in the unique position of having money to burn and no matches to start a fire with. Ten thousand dollars was more money than he had ever hoped to acquire in his most sanguine moments.

He was considering the advisability of hobbling away with the loot while the child was asleep, but added to the impracticability of traversing some two hundred miles of desert and arid upland with a pair of derelict dogs and no sled, was the problem of getting the two five-thousand dollar bills changed. If he showed his face in a bank with no other credentials, his past would be inquired into at once, and he desired above all things to avoid publicity.

Also, in the deepest and darkest recess of his predatory mind, there lurked a little stranger. It was not a nice little conscience like yours and mine, with embryo wings, but a petulant, dwarflike elf with a cynical leer and a nasty disposition.

"Yer ain't got de noive ter shake 'er an' beat it wit' de jack! Yer feel sorry fer de little runt, an' yer know ut! Battlin' Bilbo, champion lightweight of East St. Louis, gone soft on a kid because she musses up his hair! Ha, ha, ya poor prune!"

Mr. Bilbo shivered. Kindness and weakness were synonyms to him. He shied a stone at a scampering ground squirrel by the way of venting his spleen, then arose and went into the dugout. He stood looking at the sleeping child. Within him forces mightier than himself were at grips. He wiped the cold perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand, then picked up the empty water canteen and went out and banged Marian in the ribs with it—at a distance of twenty feet. The goat must have gotten the text by telepathy, for she lowered her horns and emitted a long-drawn *Ba-ah*! in deep contralto.

"Go to hell, yer old cheese foundry!" Bat growled. He turned on his heel and hobbled down to the creek to fill the canteen. Squatting on his haunches beside the deep hole, he was about to immerse the vessel, when a voice behind him called out, gruffly:

"Keep settin'! As much as turn your head, and I'll blow it off, and drown you afterward!"

Mr. Bilbo froze in his haunches. The frapped condition spread to the rest of his anatomy with astonishing rapidity. That voice carried authority, threat, and an uncanny knowledge of the vulnerable areas.

"Where's the old 'un?" the voice demanded.

Bat jerked a cautious thumb at a small mound a hundred yards down the creek, on the opposite bank, wondering if the movement would cost him his life.

"So you saved me the trouble and killed him yourself. All right, pard, trot out the plasters! Make it snappy! I'm in a hurry!"

"I didn't kill 'im," Mr. Bilbo replied, huskily, "he croaked on his own hook."

He was trying to gain time for a delicate operation. It consisted of extracting the two five-thousand-dollar bills from his vest pocket, rolling them into a small wad between his thumb and forefinger, and stuffing them

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through the mouth of the empty canteen. He succeeded.

"'S all right, pard," the voice assured him. "There won't be no embarrassing autopsy, unless you hold out on me. Throw the jack over your left shoulder and keep admiring your lineaments in that there water hole until I'm out of range!"

"Jack!" Bat repeated in well simulated astonishment, "wot're youse talking 'bout?"

A SOUND that carried the portent of the hiss of an angry, cornered rattler reached his ears.

"I'm a man of few words, and I punctuate my remarks with forty-five softnose. You'll be considering the lilies, wrong end to, in about a minute!"

Bat shrugged his shoulders.

"'Nudder one gone cuckoo," he said, as if to himself. "Mus' be de climate. Just before de old guy croaked, he moaned about a fortin', an' all I foun' wuz a tin cup, half full of brass filin's."

"Brass filings!" the voice repeated. Bat could almost hear the pricking up of the owner's ears. "Where's that tin cup?"

"In de bread box," said Bat.

"All right, stand up! Face about, and walk to the shack. One look behind you, and you'll be peppered and salted! *Vamose!*"

Bat hobbled up the steep trail with the empty canteen in his hand. When within ten feet of the dugout, the voice ordered him to lie down on the ground. He got his first look at his assailant's face while the man was trussing him up with rope and baling wire with one hand and holding the pistol in his ribs with the other. It was not a nice face. A pair of small, close-set eyes squinted at each other across a bridgeless nose which, probably for fear of obstructing their view, had wandered off in a southeasterly direction. One tiny ear hugged the skull flatly like a wad of cached pepsin. Of the other nothing remained but the lobe.

The trussing operation over, the man searched Bat minutely, then arose and went into the dugout. He came out immediately with the tin cup in his hand.

"Brass filings is good!" he laughed, hefting the cup. "Sixteen ounces of placer gold if a penny-weight. Where're you from, greenhorn?"

"De Middle West," Bat grumbled.

"Thought so," the other scoffed. He transferred the gold dust to a small leather pouch and was putting it in his pocket, when a shriek from the dugout rent the air.

The bandit whirled in his tracks, gun poised.

"What's that?" he snarled.

"Evangeline," said Bat. "Yer went an' woke 'er."

The man disappeared within. He came out lugging the youngster, who was clawing his face and howling at the futility of its efforts at remolding it. Disengaging himself, the bandit quickly dropped her on the ground beside Bat.

"Listen, Babbitt," he said, "there's ten thousand smackers in this joint, somewhere. I got the tip from a pair of knickerbockers in the smoker of the D. & T. They was kidding each other about how they slipped Methuselah a couple of five-thousand-dollar bills for his claim. I'm going to prospect for them if I have to rip the mountin' from off the ridge pole."

"Get off yer foot!" Bat scoffed. "If dere wuz ten grand 'ere, I'd be halfway to St. Louis by now."

Evangeline had stopped crying. She yawned, and blinked sleepily, then dug her fists into her eyes as if to rub out a hallucination. For a moment she sat regarding her trussed and prostrate playmate warily, evidently suspecting some sort of a trick, but presently a seraphic smile spread on her face from cheek to jowl. She had Mr. Bilbo at a disadvantage for once, and she

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seized upon the opportunity by sifting a handful of sand in his right ear.

"Cut it out!" he howled.

The bandit turned upon his heel with a sneer and dived into the dugout.

A BUNDLE of blankets came sailing through the door, followed by flock of kitchen utensils. For ten minutes it rained lares and penates. The canvas walls of the dugout shook with the man's blasphemous ejaculations. Evangeline seemed to derive great entertainment from his activities. She had selected a poker from among the collection, with which she hammered a xylophone accompaniment to the bandit's curses on the pots and pans. The empty canteen, which Bat had dropped on the ground, gave forth a deep golden note that made Bat shiver. He tried unsuccessfully to kick it out of the youngster's reach.

Presently the man came out.

"If you wasn't so dumb, I'd kill you," he growled. "Stow that racket, Paddy Ruski!"

Evangeline sat up with a jerk. She regarded the speaker coldly for a moment, then heaved the poker at him. It struck the bandit on the kneecap. He leaped into the air a full two feet, and clapped his hands to the injured spot.

"Sufferin', sweet-scented Petunia!" he roared, "if this ain't a madhouse! Lucky for you I got them sixteen ounces of gold, or I'd nail both your hides to the side of the cañon!"

Mr. Bilbo smiled to himself. After all, sixteen ounces of gold was less than three hundred dollars. No life insurance premium had been paid with greater cheerfulness. He was about to congratulate himself upon his astuteness, when the bandit picked up the empty water canteen and slung it over his shoulder by its strap.

"It'll come in handy crossing the desert. My own was punctured by a deputy's bullet down the line a ways," he said as he stepped over the prostrate Bat. "If you know what's good for you, you won't try to wriggle loose until I'm a mile or two down the cañon."

Mr. Bilbo turned his face to the earth, his mother, with a groan. Within the empty canteen, less than four feet from his face, a fortune hung suspended.

He lay perfectly still until the bandit's footsteps died away in the distance, then he began the intricate operation of liberating himself. It was full fifteen minutes before he was free. Darting into the dugout he burrowed for his aged host's pistol in the brush pile and found it. Picking up the youngster from the ground, he deposited her in the crib. She seemed to divine that she was about to be left behind, for she screwed her small face up in one of those heart-rending grimaces, which Mr. Bilbo had learned always preceded a squall. He was not disappointed.

Bat was in a hurry to be on the trail of the bandit, so he slapped her smartly between the shoulder blades to facilitate matters. To his intense astonishment Evangeline let go her wind without a murmur, and ejected a small wad of paper upon which she had been choking. Bat stared at it, then pounced upon it. With trembling fingers he unravelled two five-thousand-dollar bills, somewhat damp, and perforated here and there by tiny teeth, but otherwise of undoubted high negotiability.

"You damn little ostrich!" he said.

He tendered her a crust of sour-dough instead.

"'Ere, chew dat. It's less expensive."

There were no witnesses to what he did next, but as he bent over the crib, a sound suspiciously like a kiss shattered the murk of the dugout, and Evangeline grated the crust of sour-dough on his ten-day stubble.

THE END.

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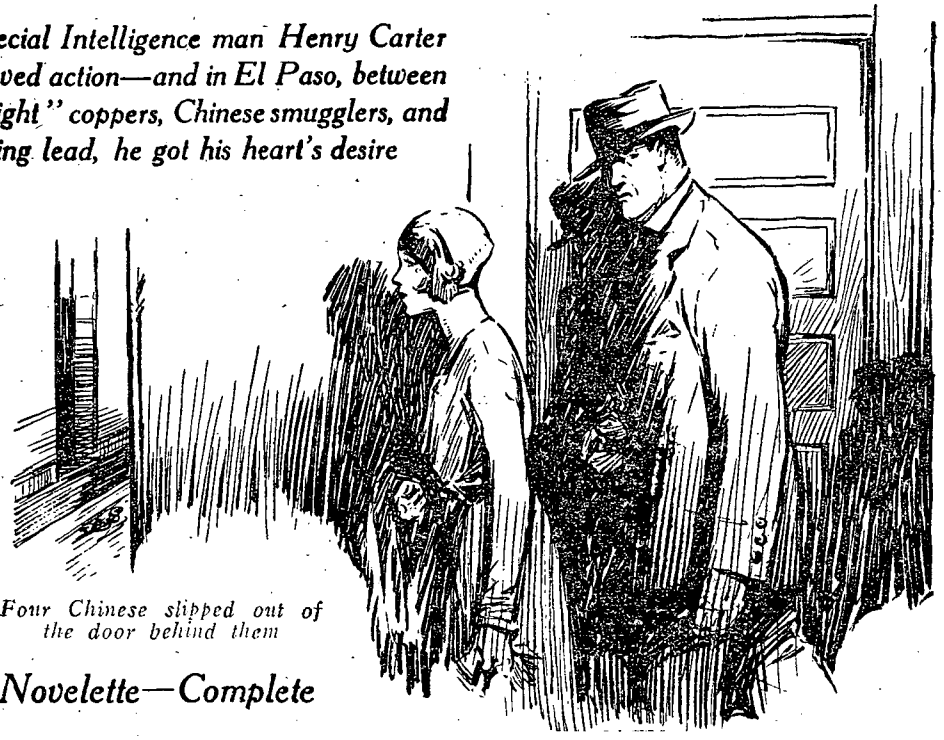
# Throw That Gat Out!

**By W. WIRT**

*Author of "Swords Are Out!" "Stopping 'Em With Lead," etc.*

*Special Intelligence man Henry Carter craved action—and in El Paso, between "right" coppers, Chinese smugglers, and flying lead, he got his heart's desire*



*Four Chinese slipped out of the door behind them*

*Novelette—Complete*

## CHAPTER I.

### A NARCOTIC SQUAD RAID.

JIMMIE LARSON, Federal narcotic agent, inched along on his stomach toward the door that dead-ended the musty smelling hall on the third floor of the rooming house in El Paso.

The man lying face down against the wall beside Larson did not stir as Jimmie started, and he had reasons. A moment before, he had been on the receiving end of a blackjack, coldly and scientifically applied to his head. He was the clerk of the rooming house, and though he received a tip of a raid a little late, he had started to warn the various guests, not knowing just who were to be the victims. There were several in the house who had no desire to see Federal officers or police either.

Larson, a firm believer in action first and apologies later if necessary, didn't stop to ask who it was that tried to run by him. His blackjack lashed out as quickly as the strike of a snake and the man had slumped down, to be eased quietly to the floor. Then Larson had started to crawl along, so as not to present any more of a target than necessary if any of the occupants of the back room decided to leave suddenly. He knew that Major Combes and two other men of the narcotic squad were by this time on their way up the fire escape in the rear.

He heard a rustle behind him and knew some one else was doing the snake act also. He slipped over on his back, drew his Colt .45 and raised his head to see who it was.

"Put that cannon up, you big



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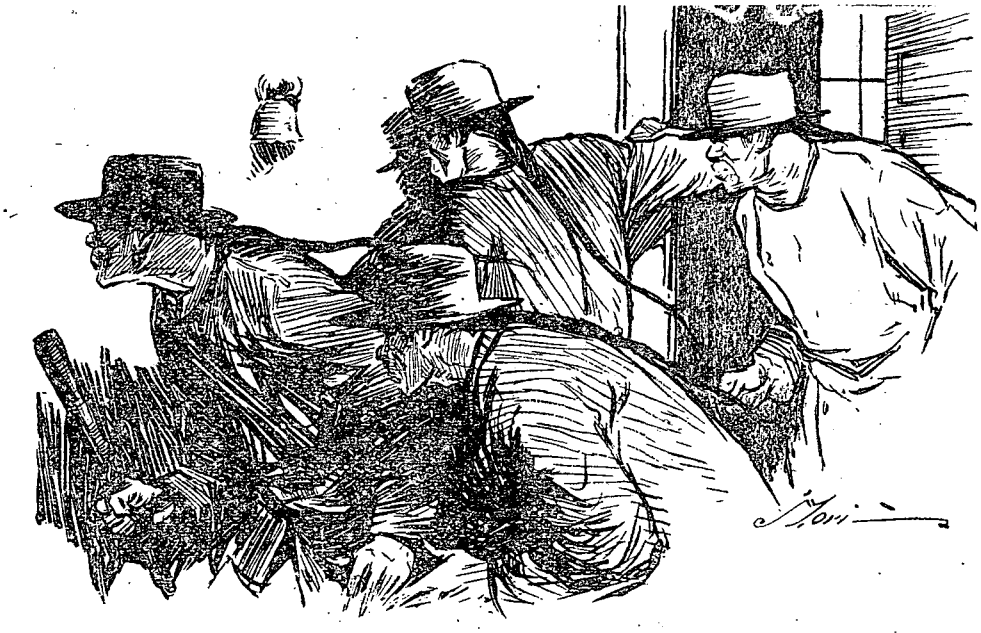
Swede," whispered a voice near his feet, "I know you got it out."

"Quit that noise," Larson cautioned, reholstering the gun as some one crawled up beside him. "How in hell did you get here, Henry?"

"How do I know?" answered Henry Carter, special intelligence unit, Treasury Department, and one of the best-liked men in the game. "I went in to see—"



From the room at the end of the hall came a scream of agony, then a woman's voice: "Don't! Oh—" Then another scream.

Carter was on his feet with the quickness of a cat, his Colt .45 already in his hand.

"Wait!" commanded Larson, getting up also. "They're not ready in back yet and—come back here. Are you crazy?" He stopped talking and followed Carter who already was halfway to the door. He might as well try halting a wounded grizzly's charge by argument and he realized it. Larson, for all his size, was fast on his feet and as Carter's shoulder went against the door, his was beside it.

The door gave way as if hit by a shell and they half stumbled, half fell into the room. It was a large one, furnished shabbily; a bed in one corner, a table in the middle on which were several bottles and glasses. On the bed lay a woman who was not much more than a girl, very drunk and laughing sillily.

Three men, none over twenty-five or six, stood by their chairs against the wall, guns out. In the center of the room another girl knelt at the feet of a swarthy, broad-shouldered man, who still had her left arm twisted cruelly behind her. As Carter and Larson burst in, he let her go and his hand flashed behind him.

Larson shouted: "Government business! Up with 'em!" Carter shot the swarthy man squarely between the eyes, and as the man fell, the gun dropped from his hand. He had been fast enough to get it out of his pocket, but that was all. Two of the young men at the wall promptly dropped their guns and raised their hands. The other laughed and his automatic spat twice at Larson, who answered shot for shot. As the man went down, Larson swayed back once, then forward and slumped

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to the floor, his head touching the man he had killed.

AS Larson hit the floor, the two windows that led out on a fire escape platform crashed in and two police officers, followed by three men in civilian clothes came hurtling in.

One of the policemen jumped straight at Carter, his nightstick raised. The other started toward the two young men who had their hands up. They were hard-boiled, those young coppers, and they fully believed in Larson's theory, hit 'em first and apologize after if necessary.

But the one that jumped at Carter suddenly froze, his nightstick in the air. Carter had swerved just a little, avoiding the left hand that had reached for his gun wrist; he came in close and his .45 Colt was up under the copper's chin. "You do," he said with a grin, "and you'll stare God in the face!"

One of the men in civilian clothes got a glimpse of Carter's face and yelled "Federal Men. Dolan! Mac! Quit!" Another jumped between the copper charging down on the two cowering young men. "Federal prisoners!" he shouted. "Put that club down!"

Dolan, the one that had Henry's gun under his chin, backed away, and the one called Mac stopped, looking in honest amazement at the man who had spoken. "What the hell of it? Let's knock their heads off."

"Be your age, Mac," grinned the civilian. "We don't do that stuff."

"No," said the young copper bitterly, looking at the two dead men on the floor and the wounded one. "You birds just shoot their heads off."

Dolan stood back a foot or so and glared at Carter who grinned cheerfully at him. "Don't be so damn free wid dat rod of yours," he growled. "You damn near drove me back teeth up a foot. Why the hell didn't you say you was an officer?"

"You didn't ask me, Mr. Dolan," Henry answered gravely, as he started over to where Larson lay.

Dolan studied that answer for a moment, then, with the sense of humor all Irish are blessed with, he grinned and said: "That's right, I didn't."

The man who had stopped the clubbing was United States Deputy Marshal Sam Collins, brought from Kentucky for a little special work. He aided Carter to raise Larson. "Through the left shoulder and—holy cats, not bad, not bad at all. That last bullet creased him, see, Sam," Carter said. "By gosh, just parted his hair on the side. Ring for an ambulance, one of you birds. This darned old Swede is no good, but we can't lose him." Henry cradled Larson's head on his knee.

A captain of police, a lieutenant, two sergeants and a motor cycle policeman clumped in from the hall. As they did, the girl on the floor got unsteadily on her feet and stood there, one hand to her heart. She was a pretty girl, even with the expression of horror on her face. Carter glanced at her.

"Here, Sam, hold Larson." He went over to her, putting his arm around her. She needed support; as she felt his firm arm, she sagged against it for an instant, then, with a visible effort, tightened up.

"What the hell is coming off here?" demanded the police captain, roughly. "This is my precinct and—"

"Just a little government business, captain," drawled the civilian who had barked out orders as the Federal men came in. "We knew you were—er—busy, so we attended to it ourselves without asking for help."

The captain glared at him, then recognizing the short, stocky man with his close-cropped white mustache and steel-blue eyes as the new section chief of the narcotic squad, he had brains enough to swallow hard and say: "Oh, I didn't see you, major. Anything I can do to help?"

"Why, no, thank you. I think we can handle it."

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The drunken girl on the bed, who had sat up when the shooting started and had been sitting there since, laughed shrilly. "Pinched again! Tony and Serge both dead! What a game! What a game!" and lurched to her feet. "You needn't think you're going to get anything out of me," she went on to the burly captain. "You big bully! You get yours and then—"

She fell back across the bed; the police captain's open palm had struck her across the mouth. It was so fast that no one could interfere. Sam Collins's hand went to his holster and Henry Carter's arm dropped from around the other girl. That police captain, no matter what risks he had run, had never been as near his death as he was at that instant.

"STEADY," drawled the major, and Collins's hand fell away, his Colt, half out, dropping back in the worn holster. Carter and the other two Federal men came to attention.

The police captain had done the only thing he could have done from his standpoint to shut her mouth. "That slut was getting nuts," he blustered.

"Captain," said the major smoothly, "as this is government business, I suggest that you withdraw with your men."

"All right," growled the captain. "That suits me. But I want to warn you right now that these crooks are snowbirds. They'll tell you anything." He glared at the two young men and the girl on the bed who now was up on her elbow, sobered considerably by the blow. "If they do tell anything"—here he paused a moment—"you cannot believe it."

"Thank you very much for the information," answered Major Combes suavely. "You have warned them—pardon—I mean me."

The captain's lip curled up like a snarling animal's, and without a word he started for the door after his men, already on their way. As he reached it, he paused and turned. "Who detailed you two on this?" he demanded, speaking to the two policemen who had come in with the Federal men.

"No one," answered Dolan promptly. "We was comin' along and we see these lads gangin' up, so we come along."

"Yeah? Well, report to me when you get to the station house," and the captain went down the hall.

"Ain't that sweet?" demanded Dolan of no one in particular.

"Get a couple of taxis, one of you birds," ordered the major. "Sam, you stay here. Carter, how in hell and blazes did you get in this?"

"I was going into the marshal's office to say howdy," explained Carter, still standing beside the girl, "and Sam Collins came out. He asked me to come along."

"So you did," interrupted the major. "Come to my office after you get through with Sam. Take these people over to the commissioner's office, Jack," he told the other Federal man. "I'll be over later. Don't forget to come and see me, Henry," and the major went out.

The girl standing by Carter turned a little and looked straight at him for a moment, then said: "I'm afraid of those awful police. Isn't there some way you can—can get me—"

"You needn't be," Henry interrupted. "You're not in their hands. Uncle Sam has got you. I don't know a darn thing about this case, but I reckon you can get bonds."

One of the young men who had promptly put his hands up, came over to them.

"Sure we will get bonds," he said. "Don't worry, kid. We will be taken in front of a United States commissioner. There'll be a bondsman there and we'll be on our way in an hour."

"You seem to know a lot about it," Carter said studying him. "I've seen you somewhere."

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"Are you sure?" demanded the girl more to him than to the young man.

"That's right," answered Carter. "If the bondsman is there."

"He will be," announced the young man. He had recovered some of his nerve that had gone glimmering when the guns were out and smoking. "You're the government cop that—"

The man who had gone for the taxis came back. "They're waiting," he said. "Come on, you birds."

Carter was looking at the young crook with a puzzled little frown as if he knew he ought to place him but couldn't. He started to ask him something, but just as he did, Sam Collins called from where he knelt by the body of the man Carter had killed. Larson had been made as comfortable as possible on the bed.

The other girl was now sitting in a chair, rocking back and forth, first laughing then crying.

Collins, searching the inside coat pocket of the swarthy man Carter had killed, chanced to pull up the right sleeve of the coat. It carried with it the loose silk shirt sleeve, and his eye caught a curious line of tattooing across the forearm almost to the wrist. He looked more intently at it, then called Carter. "Henry, come on over here and read this. You're a Chink expert."

As he said "Chink," the girl's blue eyes widened for a moment and she followed Henry to the body. As he bent down to look at it, he heard a long breath being drawn by the girl. He flashed a glance at her and for an instant saw the look of terror on her face. He didn't need any one to tell him that she knew what the tattooing was, either.

It was three Chinese characters, one under the other. "If I had my violin here I could play it," Henry announced, after looking at it closely.

As he rose, the girl whispered to him. "Oh—quick! We must go away at once. I—"

"Come on, let's go," commanded the man called Jack.

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## CHAPTER II.

### "CUT YOUR WOLVES LOOSE!"

"ALL right, young feller, me lad," said Major Combes, looking up as Carter came in. "Sit down. What happened over there? Jack hasn't got back yet, for some unknown reason, and I was held up here."

"The commissioner held 'em in ten thousand each. Some gent stepped up, signed a few papers in an airy way and the whole bunch went away from there in taxis. How's that for a short sweet report, major?"

"Not bad," agreed the major with a smile. Before he had been detailed to the narcotic division, he had been on much different stuff and twice Carter had worked under him. He liked Henry, hence the smile which few men got from the grim major who carried no mean load of lead and pieces of shrapnel inside him. "Now make a little more detailed one. What are you doing in El Paso, Henry? I hope Washington hasn't sicked you on us."

"If they had I'd have come and told you, major, right away," grinned Carter, who had small respect for his superior officers in general. "I'm not doing a darn thing, major."

"All right, tight mouth. Next time, keep away from my outfit when they are going in, then."

"Honest Injun, major," pleaded Henry. "I'm not working. I grabbed off my thirty days' annual all in a bunch so I wouldn't lose it. I just got in this morning. If I were on anything, why wouldn't I tell you? My gosh, I would want to tell you."

"All right, Henry." It appeased the major, who knew that Carter didn't lie; he was really complimented highly when he heard the "I'd want to tell you." Hiding his pleasure under a grim exterior, he said: "You made a

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mistake, though; you are doing something."

"Dog-gone it, that's what I get for jazzing around with that darn Sam Collins," complained Henry. "Major, please, suh, I'm sick, no foolin'."

"You acted that way a little while ago," said the major, a twinkle in his eye. "I saw you crack down on that bird, remember. Do you know what you did, you scoundrel? You ruined me. I wanted that lad alive."

"You did? I didn't know the game law was on hopheads, major."

"Well," admitted the major. "You're right, Henry, but it just so happened I wanted him."

"Dog-gone it, I'm sorry," said Carter. "Only I saw he was going to get me if he could."

"You couldn't have done anything else, Henry. I wanted him alive though; that was the reason I sent those two young coppers in first. I figured they would make the gents in there throw up their hands. They wouldn't be afraid of a police case. Well, it's water under the bridge now. You are not in my division, Carter, and of course you needn't get on it—but I wish like hell you would. You wouldn't believe that there were so many dumb-bells in the world as I've got—and the rottenest part of it is, I'm not so damn sure they are dumb-bells either," and the major sighed. He felt that he could unbelt before Carter. His shrewd suspicions of his men were his heaviest trouble.

"Yeah?" drawled Henry. "Why, I was only going over to Arizona to see some people. I can do that any time. I'll be glad to help you if I can, major."

"THAT'S the boy. I'm on a hard one. I don't suppose you know why I was sent here and Jones transferred—and it's none of your business anyway." The major was back in his usual stride. "Here it is: There is more dope coming across right here than ever before; and little yellow brothers also. Not only that but jewels. There has always been a certain amount, of course, but all of a sudden it or they began to flow over in bunches. We got a hot tip that this lad you killed was one of the bellwethers. He had been playing around with too many skirts at once and one of them got all fussed up and passed the word that she could and would tell a lot. Jack Desmond made contact and while what she told was nearly all hearsay, of course, she did tell that he was going to be over on this side to-day with some of his outfit, framing up a delivery or doing a little collecting. I took a chance and got the commissioner to issue warrants on general principles. I knew I couldn't break this lad, but the moral effect of having him stand a pinch might loosen up some one of the lower-downs—especially if we kept their snow away from them. Now, you come along and bust up my party by killing my chief guest."

"I'm sure sorry I did that. You say this bunch are running Chinese over?"

"Yes, and everything else; but that's the least of it. There are too darn many jewels coming in, and the big boys in Washington have got a hunch that they are coming in through here."

"Well," said Henry. "I'll tell you one thing to make up for knocking your chief guest cold; and that is, he had something to do with the Tasi Wo outfit."

"The Tasi Wo? That's a new one on me, Henry. Who are they, or it?"

"They are the still-water-runs-deep thing," answered Carter with a grin. "You hear about the Three Hip Sing and the On Leong and the rest of the tongs, but the Tasi Wo are the real simon-pures. When they say hop, the rest quit business and hop, that's all."

"How do you know he was close?" demanded the major.

"Because Sam called for me to come over and look at some tattooing on his

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arm. It was the three Chinese characters that make up the Tasi Wo slogan or warcry."

"That's a funny stunt, Henry. What would he be doing with anything of that kind on him?"

"That is what I would like to know. When I looked at what was left of his face below the eyes, it had a Chinese look about it. You know, as if his features had reverted back and smoothed out. That bird had Chinese blood in him."

"Well, maybe he did. Where is this Tasi Wo located?"

"All over the lot. Here—up north—everywhere. General headquarters is in China. I'll tell you something else, also: the girl that screamed knew the characters."

"Yes? What are they, Henry?"

"Well, it is hard to translate them. Each one means several things. This is as close as I can get to it: '*Be in Awe.*'"

"You say the girl knew it?" asked the major, who was a short, stocky-built man, with a close-cropped white mustache and steel-blue eyes.

"She knew the characters. I don't know whether she knew what they meant, but she was in awe, all right."

The major looked out the window for a minute or more. Carter sat still and watched him, a grin on his thin, tanned face.

Finally the major looked back at him. "All right, Henry; you go and find that girl and see if you make her talk. I think I have a slant on things now. Get going."

"Yes, sir," answered Carter promptly. "I'm on my way now."

CARTER went over to the marshal's office and found Sam Collins waiting for him. "You got me in a nice jam, you polecat," he greeted Mr. Collins. "Instead of going on my way I've got to stick around. Did you do 'er, Sam?"

"I did. She went over to the Stalton and registered as Miss Anna Jones, New York."

"Yeah? I wonder if she is still there."

"Cease wondering: she is. The house dick is a friend of mine and he's doing the cat-at-the-rat-hole stunt for me. He was to phone if she went out, and have a bellhop trail along. Boy, I ought to be an S. I. guy myself instead of the best United States deputy marshal—"

"Unhung," concluded Henry. "I've no time to fool around with you. You got me put to work, dog-gone you. I'm going over and see her."

"I'll go with you," answered Sam.

"Only as far as the lobby," said Henry firmly.

On being told by the house dick, who was an old deputy marshal, that Miss Jones was still in her room—No. 408—Carter wasted no time in telephoning to ask for an interview. He went up to the fourth floor and knocked at the door. It was opened by the girl, who, when she saw Carter, made an involuntary movement as if to shut the door, hesitated a moment, then opened it, stepping back so that Carter could come in. As soon as he was in, she closed the door.

"Sit down, Mr. Carter," she said calmly. "I think you are doing a very foolish thing, coming here like this. What is it you want?" Her bearing had changed, also her voice, from that of the girl who had clung to him in the rooming house early that morning. Now she was self-contained and showed in no way any after-effect of what had happened, except that her left wrist was bandaged with a wet cloth. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I don't see why," Henry answered cheerily, sitting down on a chair by the window. "I saw this morning that you were not in that outfit, and—"

"You saw that I—what do you mean, Mr. Carter?"

"Why, any one need only look at you to know that you are no hophead,

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or sleigh-rider either. Also that you are nine thousand and eight degrees higher up."

"Just who are you, Mr. Carter?" asked the girl, not paying any attention to Henry's compliment or smile.

"I am what is known as a Federal agent, Miss Jones, attached to a special intelligence unit in Washington." He looked at the very pretty girl a little more intently, then asked: "By any chance, are you—ascertaining some facts yourself?"

"I don't know what you mean," she answered coldly. "Well, Mr. Carter, I will save your wasting any time. I have no explanation to offer in any way for this morning, although I want to thank you for killing that beast." The girl spoke very good English, but Henry was conscious of a slight foreign accent, of what country he couldn't be sure. She looked a bit exotic; he guessed she was Russian.

"I'm right sorry," drawled Carter. "I sure am disappointed, thinking you might need some help. Why did you act so frightened when you saw the Chinese tattooing on—what is his name?"

The girl smiled. "His name was Serge Volkonski, Mr. Carter."

"And he had Chinese blood," added Henry.

"Yes," answered the girl, slowly. "He had Chinese blood; and that brings me to the other part of your question. I was afraid for very good reasons, Mr. Carter. That is all I will tell you," and the girl rose.

"You didn't kill him," said Henry. "I did. Why should you be afraid?"

"Because I was told to go there; a man would meet me." The girl stopped, rose once more. "I will have to ask you to—"

A PEREMPTORY rap at the door interrupted her. She opened it and Police Captain Rogers, who was not in uniform now, pushed his way in, followed by two detective sergeants, the last of whom closed the door behind him. Henry had risen at the knock. The girl slipped around the burly detective sergeants and stood as close to Henry as she could get. She was patently afraid of the police, a physical fear, not a mental one.

Rogers saw Carter and halted. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Well, suh," drawled Carter, "if you will wait I'll write Washington and ask if I can tell you. Soon as they know it's a real live police captain in El Paso who wants to know, they'll wire permission, I bet you." Then his voice changed and became cold, and a little smile came on his lips. It wasn't a friendly, warm smile, it was the frozen one of a killer and the same smile was in his eyes: "None of your business, Mr. Police Captain, do you understand? That goes for you, for the two detective sergeants with you, and for the whole police force of El Paso. If the lady wasn't present I'd make it stronger."

"Yeah?" snarled Rogers. "You're one of these hard guys, ain't you? Well, we'll make it our business; what do you know about that?"

"Fair enough," answered Henry, "and I'll clear the way for you so that you can start right in doing it." He touched the girl on the shoulder. "I arrest you in the name of the United States government. Get your hat and coat and come with me. Now," he went on to Rogers, "the way is all clear for you gents. Cut your wolves loose!"

"Where is your warrant?" blustered Rogers.

One of the sergeants laughed and interrupted: "Don't be any more of a damn fool than you can help, Bill. Back away for a minute."

The girl had promptly gone away from Carter's side and was calmly putting on her hat and coat by the dresser.

"You got us wrong," the sergeant went on to Carter. "No need of getting tight with us. The captain here

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knows better than to interfere with the Federal. One of those birds that got his this morning was a crook we been wanting to pick up for a long time. We figured this dame might put us hot on some of his buddies."

"We just wanted to ask her a few questions," Captain Rogers said. He had taken hold of himself and now spoke smoothly. He had under control the hot temper that had flamed up when he had seen Carter and realized how slim were the chances of getting the girl alone at the moment. He knew that he had committed a tactical blunder in trying to bluff the slim, tanned young man in front of him. "Pat, here, is right—no need to get hard at all. We work with the Federal lads all the time. You're new here, aren't you?"

"I got in this morning," smiled Carter, "and I hate like the dickens to get hard myself, only when any one else does, I always seem to—" He looked at the three men and continued: "I'm a right guy, fellers."

"So are we," said the detective sergeant who had not spoken. "Come on around to 86 and meet the boys."

"I will," answered Henry eagerly. "I always worked with the boys back East. I'm sorry I got tight. My name is Carter," and he held out his hand to the police captain. Rogers said at once, shaking hands: "My name is Rogers. This is Detective Sergeant Pat O'Neill and this is Angelo Serroco, a damn good dick, if I say it myself."

The girl had backed against the dresser as Carter said, "I will," and was standing there, a look of contempt and fear combined on her face.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Carter after the handshaking was over. "I got to bring this skirt to the major, no foolin'. He wants to look her over. Leave it to the major to look 'em over when they are young and pretty. I'll stick around, and as soon as he is through with her I'll bring her over to you birds. How's that?"

"Fine," answered Rogers. "Will you do that, Carter?"

"I will, just as soon as the major gets through with her. I'm afraid to let you have her first. They tell me that he is awful tight."

"Don't you know him very well?" asked Serroco.

"No, I got sent out here with a D. J. man after a lad who was cluck shovin', and I just got in early this morning. His department and mine are way different."

"Yeah? What were you doing with them this morning, then?"

"I went over to the marshal's office to see a bird I knew and he asks me to come along on a knock-off. I didn't know where we were going. That feller I cracked down on was reaching for a rod, so I let him have it."

"Too bad the rest didn't reach also," grinned O'Neill. "Well, we'll be looking for you, old kid. Drop around tonight and we'll show you the elephant in this man's town. Maybe we can help you find the bird you're looking for."

"I will. I told the major I'd get this dame for him, that's all I got to do with it."

THE police captain and the detectives went out after favoring the girl with sneering smiles and glances that promised what would happen to her if she told anything she knew to any one.

After the door closed behind them the girl turned to Carter.

"You are one that deliberately tries to get the confidence of a girl and then—"

"Hold it," he interrupted. "It was the only thing I could do, can't you see that? Remember, you are under arrest, madame. I didn't say how soon the major would get through with you, did I?"

—The girl's eyes widened and she looked intently once more at the smiling Carter. "But, you say that—"

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"I've said lots of things in my sad old life. Come on. We've got to go through with the play. I'll take you to Major Combes, and, please don't worry.

"He will protect you against all the police captains in the world."

"Am I really under arrest again?" demanded the girl.

"No," answered Henry with a grin. "You can't be arrested twice for the same offense. But you'd better help me pretend you are. If you don't want the police to pick you up, it's much safer to be in the hands of the Federal."

The girl suddenly smiled, after looking intently at Carter once more. "Come on then," she said.

The Stalton was a first class hotel, but had been built in the days when space did not have to be economized on and the halls were wide. The room that the girl had been given was in one of the ells around the corner from the elevators. As Carter and she walked down toward them, he was on her right, which put him fairly close to the row of doors on the other side. The girl had stepped onto the run of carpet going down the middle, and Carter, in giving her plenty of room, was within two feet of the doors on his right.

Just after they passed a door about halfway down the hall it opened noiselessly.

A head appeared, saw that the hall was empty but for Carter and the girl, turned for a moment, then four Chinese slipped out of the door silently and fast.

Carter sensed rather than heard them, and whirled, only to meet a blow on the side of his head from a short thick club that knocked him out without a sound. At the same moment a hand and arm went around the girl's mouth and neck. Another tackled her legs.

She was lifted up, as was Carter, and taken into the room the men had come out of. The whole thing did not take the time necessary to count three slowly.

## CHAPTER III.

### A BEARCAT AT FRAMING.

"THAT was luck," said Police Captain Rogers as he sat down at his desk in No. 86 station. "If that lad Carter will play like he says, we'll have an inside track—"

"To the Stone House," supplied O'Neill. "For Pete's sake, Bill, use your brains a little. He was easing us off."

"What for?" demanded Serroco. "Listen, Pat, use your own. He didn't have to do any easing, that bird. He would have shot it out with the three of us, right there. I can tell 'em when I see 'em. That bird is a natural-born killer. Did you get that 'well, suh,' stuff? He's from Kentucky, like that damn Collins they got over to the marshal's office, I bet you. Why should he ease us when he'd already run his sandy and made it stick?"

"If he's a right guy," began Rogers again, "he could help."

"Oh, for Gawd's sake," snarled O'Neill. "It's a damn good thing you two pudding-heads had me along. Can't you see that he was trying to put that over, that right-guy stuff? Listen, the real guy is the one that showed first—the cut-your-wolves-loose guy. He did the rest on general principles. If we fell for it, he was so much to the good. If we didn't, no harm done. I'll prove it to you. That rat we picked up this morning after he gave bond—have him brought up, Bill."

Captain Rogers didn't seem to object at all to taking orders from a detective sergeant. He pushed a button, a policeman opened the door, and about three minutes later the young man who had assured the girl that a bondsman would be at the commissioner's, was pushed roughly into the room. His

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face was once more as it had been when guns were out and smoking. He knew that he was in as much danger now.

"Come 'ere, you dirty little lush toucher," snarled the captain, rising from the desk.

"Don't!" pleaded the boy, who wasn't much more than eighteen. "I'm a right guy, captain. Don't you go beating me up now. I work for—"

"What the hell do I care who you work for?" almost yelled Rogers, coming around the desk. "I'll teach you to—"

"Sit down," commanded O'Neill, not raising his voice.

Rogers stopped as if shot and obeyed without a word. O'Neill was a sergeant and he a captain, but outside of the police department O'Neill rated higher in certain circles and he knew that if O'Neill said the word, his stay in the department would be short, also his stay on earth if O'Neill ordered it.

"It is information we want at the moment," O'Neill said as Rogers sat down. "Not to be entertained by your well-known skill in extracting yells. Sit down, boy. You're right among your friends. I'll see that no one touches you if you will come clean."

"I will," gasped the young man. "I will tell you anything."

"No," answered O'Neill. "We don't want anything. All we want is the truth, buddy. If you don't know, say so, but be sure you don't know. We have ways of checking up. Now, what was it you started to tell me when I picked you up this morning? Remember, just before the other officers came up. What's your right name, buddy?"

"It's—Peter Hutton," answered the young man, wetting his dry lips.

"And where are you from, Pete?"

"From Frisco."

"What were you doing there, to make you come over here?" O'Neill's tone was smooth and friendly, but in it was always a veiled threat.

"I was drivin' one of Willy Scott's cars."

"Who is Scott and what is he doing?"

"He's dead, and most of his gang are dead, too. He was running hot stuff up from Tiajuana and—and everything else, I guess."

"I SEE. And you were one of his drivers. Well, that's nothing, Pete. Lot's of good boys are driving hot cars. Did you come up before he died, Pete? You didn't kill him, did you?"

"Me? Kill Willy Scott! I was only one of the drivers. I was there when he was killed, though."

"And that," said O'Neill, "brings us up to what you started to tell me this morning. Who killed him, Pete?"

"That feller that killed Serge this morning. He's a gunfighter from hell, that guy!"

"What were you doing during the fight, Pete?"

"Me? I was under the table. I ain't no gunfighter. It always makes me sick to see 'em pointed at me. He's a government dick named Carter."

"There are a lot more that feel the same way," said O'Neill with a grim smile. "What did you get, Pete?"

"I got a stretch, but the Governor knew my old man and after doin' a sixer I got a lifeboat. Say, what's the chances of getting a cigarette? I ain't had nothin' since I was settled."

"Excuse me," said O'Neill, tossing over a package of cigarettes. "Help yourself, Pete." Rogers's eyes tightened. He could never understand O'Neill's methods. His own idea was to beat the information out of any one that he thought had it.

"Now," after the boy had lighted a cigarette and taken a long drag. "This Carter, are you sure he is the same man?"

"Yes, sir, he is. I knew him this morning, but he didn't know me. Say," the boy was getting bolder now; "you ought to hear what they say about him in Arizona and California."



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"Go ahead and tell us," answered O'Neill. "We've got plenty of time."

"Why, the way he could shoot and the way he framed Scott and a lot of the crooked John Laws."

"He framed the John Laws, did he, Pete?"

"Yeah, boy. That is what they say he is a bearcat on doing. That framing stuff."

"I see. Well, Pete, we are going to turn you loose. Turn him loose, Rogers. Pete is a good boy, and I like him. Remember, Pete, if you hear anything, I'm your friend."

"You bet I will, Mr. O'Neill. I ain't no stool, but I might pick something up. Sorta like to be dick myself."

"It's a great life. Maybe I can get you on some day. By the way, if you hear anything about what this lad Carter is doing, let me know, Pete."

"Say, I sure will do that. That guy knocked my boss off and I'll—"

"Don't promise, Pete. Then you won't be blamed if nothing happens. Go on now and if you get picked up, give me a ring."

Rogers had pressed a button and now a policeman was at the door. The captain gave a curt order and Pete went out with the copper.

"I don't get it at all," said Serroco, after the door closed. "What is the idea, Pat?"

"I've got a hen on," answered O'Neill.

"All right with me. I guess Bill and I don't fit in this board of strategy stuff."

"I know damn well I don't," said Rogers. "Tell us what to do, Pat."

## CHAPTER IV.

### LORDS OF THE TASI WO.

CARTER came back slowly, groping his way through a fog up toward the light that seemed always to recede. He felt as if he had been climbing always, for millions of years toward the light and was tired of trying. But something in him kept urging him, "go on up—go on up." Finally the fog cleared a little, then more, and he reached the light at least. His lean, hard body, stocked with the vitality of clean living, had fought for him and when he opened his eyes he was back.

He knew he was on a couch of some kind and that he was also naked with the exception of the lower half of his underwear. There was a covering of some kind over him and his head was on a pillow. From where he lay he could see the blue sky, and, in the far distance a range of hills. The last thing he remembered was turning in the hall and seeing the downward swoop of something toward his head. Now he lay without movement, letting the new strength go through him.

"You have returned, Mr. Carter?" a suave voice asked in perfect English.

Carter raised up on his elbow. There in the room, about ten or twelve feet from the couch on which he lay, sat four Chinamen, two of them in immaculate business clothes, the others in the loose cotton smocks of the Chinese coolie. The room was unfurnished except for the couch and the chairs on which sat the two men dressed in business clothes. The other two sat on their heels on the floor, legs under them.

"Yes," answered Carter calmly, "I have returned." As he sat up the two coolies tensed as if for a spring. One of the seated men raised his right hand and they relaxed.

"I would suggest," he said, "that in the future you make no sudden moves of any kind, Mr. Carter. It might be that I would not be present to restrain my men and you would very promptly be hurt."

Carter laughed. "I will heed your warning, O elder brother of the magnificent and powerful Tasi Wo."

The Chinaman's face was impassive as he asked: "You know of the Tasi Wo?"



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"Who doesn't? Once they were to be respected above all others, but now—the Three Hip Sing and the On Leong will smile and call in their Boo How Doi and tell them to lay aside the hatchet. They will be told that the Tasi Wo has lost face and is not to be feared or obeyed."

The Chinaman's eyes widened a little in spite of his control.

"You speak in riddles. What will cause the Three Hip Sing and the On Leong to smile? You show that you are familiar with matters that it is unwise that one of your race know. Are you also familiar with Lingith, the death of the thousand cuts? It will be yours if you do not speak—and quickly."

"I am," answered Carter with a grin. "Very familiar. I saw it performed at Wu'ch'eng and Chung-too."

"You saw? And you speak of the Boo How Doi, the hatchet men?"

Then the memory of the girl came back to Carter with a rush. She had been beside him in the hall, going confidently with him, a smile on her lips. Henry Carter, United States agent, literally bared his teeth and snarled two sentences in Mandarin Chinese. In them were the words "Tasi Wo—Meng Yi— Shantung."

THE effect on the Chinamen was as if they had come in contact with a powerful electric battery. The two that were seated jerked up from their chairs and both raised their left hands in a peculiar turning gesture toward their throats.

The two on the floor were on their knees, their heads against it before the sentences were fairly out of his mouth.

"We—we did not know, mighty one," stammered the Chinaman who had been doing the talking.

"Send these little brothers away," ordered Carter in Chinese. Then in English: "Speak English. It is many years since I spoke Chinese."

The Chinaman snarled an order to the two on the floor and they crawled to the door, one raised himself high enough to open it, and they went out, closing the door after them.

"Who commands?" Carter asked.

"I, resplendent Prince."

"This other brother then has my permission to go. First, where is she?"

"Here, Lord of Millions."

"Unharmed?"

"Yes, O elder brother, unharmed."

"My clothes will be brought to me, and food and drink. Then bring her."

The Chinaman who had been ordered to go, bowed low and backed out.

"You have my permission to sit down," Carter said to the one remaining.

"Your condescension to my miserable self is worthy of your greatness," and the Chinaman sat down.

"What is your name?"

"My miserable name is Chi-lu."

"Of the magnificent house of Chao?"

"Yes, great one, of the insignificant House of Chao."

"You command in the South?"

"Yes. Here and all of South America."

"Then complete:

*"'A flaw can be ground*
*From a scepter white—'"*

Chi-lu finished:

*"'A slip of the tongue*
*No man can right.'"*

"It is well to hold that in memory," said Carter gravely. "First, in honor, I must make a statement. I am an agent of the United States government now, as you know. If I have to choose between the Tasi Wo and the United States government, I will choose my government. The Mandarin Meng Yi, who now sits on high with his venerable ancestors, will know and understand my choice. This I tell you, Chi-lu, so that if the Tasi Wo cross my path, and my duty and honor require that there be warfare, it will be honorable warfare."

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"For a thousand years, O elder brother, when a Tasi Wo finds that his allegiance to the society crosses his duty to his ancestors or to China—as she was once, not the hybrid thing she is to-day—then by making the declaration you have made, it is honorable warfare and to be conducted in all honor until the time comes that he may declare that the duty in honor is past. That is the law."

"That is correct," answered Carter. "The time for me to declare honorable warfare has not come yet. I trust it will not."

"We also. You will be a mighty antagonist, O friend of princes."

Carter grinned. "I'll do the best I can—and I know the Tasi Wo will. I will now ask some questions, to be answered by the Tasi Wo, knowing that honorable warfare may be just over the horizon. Now I ask in all brotherly love."

"Ask them, O elder brother."

"WHY should a Russian named Serge Volkonski have tattooed on his arm the symbol? That is what I meant by the Tasi Wo losing face, little brother."

The Chinaman's face remained as impassive as ever, but he could not hide the surprise that came in his eyes.

"Serge Volkonski was the Russian agent of the Tasi Wo in Moscow," he replied. "We did not know that he had marked on his arm the symbol. Truly, we have lost face."

"Not now. I killed him. Let it be known that he was killed, on orders, for daring to have on his body the sacred symbol. You will state that I, Wang-sun Chia, of the Tasi Wo, acted as executioner. I killed him in the performance of my duty as a Federal officer, before knowing; but the explanation will serve."

"You have restored the face of the Tasi Wo, O high one. Word will go out. It may be that he was given the symbol on paper to show, and being afraid of its being taken from him or lost, he had it transferred to his body."

"That no doubt is the explanation. Is the Tasi Wo now in the jewel importing business?"

"That question I cannot in honor answer, O elder brother."

"Was Serge Volkonski acting for the Tasi Wo when killed?"

"That question I also cannot answer, mighty prince."

"What has the girl done that she should be brought in front of the Chiefs?"

"The reason she was brought here is that we might find out what she was doing with the dog you killed."

"Then Serge Volkonski was not acting for the Tasi Wo in the matter that concerned her; otherwise you would have known."

"Your logical deductions are so brilliant my poor weak mind is dazed and cannot follow, lord."

"Why was I brought here with her?"

"We wish to find out also just why you killed Serge Volkonski and what you knew of the Tasi Wo's operations. We did not know, then, that you were our elder brother."

"You knew I was a Federal officer," said Carter with a smile. "Kidnaping a Federal officer is good for twenty years."

"If you are now in honorable warfare," answered Chi-lu blandly, "I do not know what you are talking about. I come out to my ranch and find a stranger there, smelling vilely of alcohol; and he states—what does he state?"

"It isn't honorable warfare yet. He could only state that he saw four Chinese, got a blow on the head, and woke up out here."

"I am afraid that no court would issue a warrant on such testimony against the president of the Southern Importing Company," said Chi-lu gravely.

"I'm afraid not either," grinned

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Carter. "Well, answer this one: how do you think it possible that a man and a girl can be seized in a city hotel, and taken to a ranch?"

"Many ways, victorious warrior of many battles. One way might be that two of the wheeled carts in which the linen is collected should be used to conceal them. They might be taken down the service elevator, which could possibly be manned by a brother; out the rear, into a wagon—all as if in the course of the day's work. Much work around a hotel is done by Chinese, especially in the rear. It may be that those who were not members of a society could be shown something that would make them very forgetful."

"Yes," answered Carter, just as gravely, "that is possible, little brother. Now I will go, taking the girl with me. This I will say: I think she wanted to sell some jewels to Serge Volkonski. How much she knows I do not know. I go—and take her with me—as Wang-sun Chia of the Tasi Wo, so as to save my face which I lost in being put in a dirty linen cart. This I give as an order."

"To be obeyed without question, O lord with power of life and death over us all up to the Two-Headed Dais."

"VERY good," Carter said calmly. "And now, listen, O Chi-lu, Chief of the South. I will take the maiden and return to El Paso, asking her no questions and hearing no talk made by her. At sunrise to-morrow morning, I, Wang-sun Chia of the Tasi Wo, declare honorable warfare between the Tasi Wo and me, to last until I join my venerable ancestors on high, or until my duty in honor has passed. Then I will come in front of the two chiefs to receive such penalty as I have incurred and deserve."

The Chinaman rose. "It is a declaration given in honor and received in honor. The Tasi Wo accepts it as such. From sunrise to-morrow morning, there is honorable warfare between the Tasi Wo and Wang-sun Chia. If death comes to Wang-sun Chia his name shall be kept clean on the scroll. If to brother or brothers of the Tasi Wo, their names also will be kept clean. When the duty of Wang-sun Chia is over, he will stand in front of the Two Chiefs and be judged."

Carter used a Chinese phrase which meant in English "Done" or "You're on." Then he and Chi-lu began chatting of China, as calmly as if they were seated in Chi-lu's scented gardens in Tsow.

A few minutes later Carter's clothes were brought to him, and after he had finished dressing, which included putting on the shoulder holster in which was his loaded .45 Colt, the girl was brought in. Her face showed plainly the strain she was and had been under, but her head was held high and now there was no fear in her eyes. It was as if she was keyed up to meet anything that might come and determined to meet it bravely.

When she saw Carter sitting fully clothed, at a food-laden table that had been brought in just before she arrived, her eyes widened.

Carter rose as she entered.

"You have a car here?" he asked Chi-lu.

The Chinaman bowed. "Yes." He used no adjectives or praise sentences in front of the girl.

"I will take it. Have it ready in a half hour."

The Chinaman bowed again.

"You have my permission to go," Carter went on. Every Chinaman in the room, the two that had brought his clothes and the food, the two that had come with the girl, bowed, went out.

The girl stood there with an expression of absolute astonishment on her pretty face.

"Sit down and eat," said Carter with a grin. "That's what I took the half hour for."

"You!" gasped the girl. "You are —what are you? The Tasi Wo is—"

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"Yeah, boy, all of it and then some," interrupted Carter. "In the meantime the coffee is getting cold. You must eat something."

"Oh, this may be one of the ways they torture people; letting them think they are going to be free and then—"

"What! Torture? My gosh, woman, realize you are under arrest, and Uncle has got you. You're as safe as if you were in church, Miss ——, dog-gone it, I don't remember your name, the one you registered under."

The girl looked at him, trying to believe him, but not allowing herself to. "My name? You may call me Stasia," she answered, sitting down at the table.

A little less than half an hour later, Carter and Stasia started away from the ranch in a high-powered roadster, after being directed how to reach the road leading to El Paso.

The girl sat silently at Carter's side until they began to come down from the Hueco Mountains where the ranch lay in a secluded little valley.

"Now," she said, "I want you to tell me how you managed this."

"I can't," answered Carter with a grin. "Wait till morning. My gosh, I'll bet Sam Collins is taking that hotel apart."

"Wait until morning? Do you mean that you can explain why you, a white man, can force the Tasi Wo to release you?"

"And you also," said Carter cheerfully. "Don't forget you're loose, too. Remember you're a prisoner and prisoners mustn't talk. Why should I explain anything to you, Stasia?"

The girl's rounded little chin went up and she turned away from him and began watching the desert.

"THERE isn't any mystery about it," went on Carter. "My father was a missionary and we lived in China and the Orient for a long time. I was only three years old when we went there and after he died I fussed around until eight years ago, then I came back to the States. There was only my father and I, Stasia. He was very close to Meng Yi, and I grew up with Meng Yi's sons. After my father's death, I lived with them."

"You, the son of an American missionary, grew up with the sons of the Mandarin Meng Yi?"

"Why not?" asked Carter quizzically. "An American can grow up with any one. We came from Breathitt County, Kentucky, and before my pa saw the light, as he called it, he was a right smart gunfighter. Old Meng Yi got caught in a tight place one day on the river when some pirates jumped his little pleasure junk. It was near my pa's place and he took his old double-barreled shotgun and a lot of buckshot shells. He strapped on the old .44 single-actioned cannon he called his pistol and got in a rowboat and out he went. Yeah, boy, my pa sure slid from grace for a little while. The Chinese were so busy fighting that they didn't notice his coming, I reckon. Anyway, he mopped up on the pirates. Pappy would quit religion for a fight anytime. He couldn't help it, he said."

"So that is why you—"

"Well, Meng Yi always thought my pa had saved his bacon. It's no secret that he was the head of the Tasi Wo, which, you understand, is a strictly honorable trading society, Miss Stasia."

"Yes," answered the girl, "I've heard so. I was born in China, Mr. Carter, although my father wasn't a missionary. I know the Tasi Wo are —all you say, of course."

Carter laughed. "Well, after Meng Yi went on high, his two sons became head of the Tasi Wo. Naturally, being the son of the Rev. Wesley Pickett Carter, and growing up with them, I had learned to speak Chinese; and orders had been given many years ago that the Tasi Wo honor and obey first my father, then me. See, Stasia, it's simple, isn't it? That explains why the Chinamen who took us, not knowing

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who I was in China, let us go. They knew my two foster brothers would be right fussy at whoever did anything to me, no matter how high they were."

"But you—are you a Tasi Wo?"

Carter grinned and eased the car around a narrow curve before answering.

"I'm one of Uncle's men, Stasia, first, last, and all the time. When I'm not that, I'm a lot of things."

"That does not answer my question. Are you a Tasi Wo?"

"On advice of counsel I refuse to answer the question," answered Carter solemnly. "Tell me about Russia."

As he spoke, his eyes picked up a car heavily loaded with men coming toward them up the narrow trail that tacked back and forth among the hills below.

Without a word he stopped, backed the car and turned it so that it was directly across the trail, barring any other cars from passing. He stood up and looked around. On the right a little higher up and about sixty yards back was a rock ledge. Up the ledge, running horizontally, was a crevice about six feet from the ground. It commanded the trail below and above the car.

"Come on," he commanded, getting out of the car. "Quick!"

"Where? Why? What is the—"

"Car coming up full of men. Whatever's strange is hostile, in this man's country. Come on!"

The girl obeyed without further talk and ran up the hill to the ledge with Carter. When they got under the crevice Carter said: "I'll get up first—maybe a snake or something up there," and pulled himself up and over the edge.

"All clear," he announced, leaning over the side, his arms down. "Take hold and I'll pull you up."

The girl was stronger than she looked and Carter hardly felt a pull at his arms as she came up beside him.

"Now," he said, "we'll hole up and see who are the gents that are coming. Maybe-so it's Sam Collins."

## CHAPTER V.

### INSIDE STUFF.

PETER HUTTON had finally located O'Neill and Serroco in a speakeasy down on Sixteenth Street.

"I got something hot," he said after they sat down in a little private room.

"That's good; what is it?" asked O'Neill.

"When I left you guys I hunted up the Whispering Kid. He's the other lad that got out on bond. He said the frill that had tried to do business with Serge was over at the Stalton. He saw her going over, and there was a dick trailing her, but she didn't know it."

"What kind of a dick?"

"Aw, one of them damn deputy marshals."

"I see. Go on, Pete."

"Well, over I goes also—see? I know a lad that works there as pantryman."

"And bootlegs on the side," interrupted Serroco. "You mean Abe Cohen. Go on."

"I don't know what he does on the side. Well, anyway, I'm sitting in his hole with him and the doors open—see? All of a sudden along comes four or five Chinks with two of them big boxes on wheels, with a lot of dirty sheets and stuff in 'em. An assistant cook comes along. He's a Chink too, and he stops 'em for a moment. One of the other Chinks he says something low in Chink talk, and this bird goes against the wall, scared stiff—see? They takes the two boxes out and loads 'em into a covered delivery truck, boxes and all."

"Wait a minute, Pete. Could you see all this from where you were sitting?"

"Naw, I gets up and trails along

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a little behind. Abie he comes too, not so close either. We think they are copping something, see, and we might stop 'em."

"You mean you might get a cut-in later," grinned O'Neill.

Pete grinned. "Well, anyway, we sees 'em load whatever it was from one of the kitchen windows, and then we go back and Abie talks to the Chink that was scared. That damn yellow-boy wouldn't say a word except 'No see—no see—velly blind!' and a lot of stuff like that."

"All right; go on, Pete. What then?"

"Why, in a little while I goes out the side way and comes around in front and goes in the lobby. There's the house dick and one of those marshals and a lot more government cops raising hell."

"Who was the deputy, Pete? Do you know?"

"Yeah. I asked a bellhop. Sam Collins."

"Sam Collins? He's this lad Carter's buddy, we found that out. What was the holler about, Pete?"

"Why, here's the hot part. This bellhop tells me that this Sam Collins and another bird comes in about a half hour before, and the other lad goes upstairs."

"And this other lad?"

"The bellhop described him. It was Carter."

"Boy," said O'Neill, "you're going to be on the force some day. Go on."

"The bellhop says this Sam Collins sat around in the lobby for awhile, then he gets uneasy and begins walking around. Finally he gets the house dick and upstairs they go. In about ten minutes down they come, and hell begins to pop. It rains all kinds of government cops and Rangers, and the bellhop says they sure took the hotel apart."

"Didn't you and Abie tell them about the Chinamen, Pete?"

"Naw, we didn't say a damn word. To hell with 'em. Let 'em do their own gum-shoeing."

"That's the boy, Pete. Here's twenty dollars. Go and see if you can pick up some more dope. You're just the same as a dick right now. If any cop flags you, say you're flying for me."

"I will." Pete went out, his hat pulled down over his eyes—a regular detective in his own mind, at least. Just what would happen to him if any of his former buddies even thought he was squawking didn't occur to him at the moment.

"THAT bird that's the head of the Southern Importing Company gets most of the Chinks' work around here, I know that," said Serroco.

"You mean Chi-lu? He's too tight in with the higher-ups, old kid. We can't beat any dope out of him."

"I know it. One of the boys brought a Mex snowbird in last night, and Rogers has been working on him. He has been slipping a few yellows over without buying the road. Maybe we can get a line from him as to who's who."

"Come on," interrupted O'Neill. "He'll know something anyway."

They got up and went over to the station house. Rogers was there, and grinned as they told him they were going downstairs to see some one.

The Mexican was young in years, but old in vice and crime, a snowbird, and his cocaine had been taken from him twenty-four hours before. Cowered back in the corner of his cell as the two hard-faced, cruel-eyed detectives entered it, he was shivering as if deadly cold, and his hands and feet and face were jerking and twitching. Ten minutes later they came back upstairs to Rogers's office.

As the two left the cell, the cell-keeper locked it and sauntered outside. "Goin' out for a cup o' coffee, Tim," he told the desk sergeant. "Keep an eye on me pets in there."

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O'Neill sat beside Rogers's desk. "Well, here it is. This snowbird didn't know much, but what he did was plenty for us. Chi-lu of the Southern Importing Company is top cutter of the Tasi Wo tong. The man Carter knocked off was trying to bull the girl into delivering the stones to him, claiming that the tong would buy them."

"You can't touch Chi-lu on that kind of boloney," interrupted Rogers.

"Damn it all, listen, you fathead!" snarled O'Neill. "I know that as well as you do, you dumb flannel-mouth. Keep still now."

Rogers's face got red, but he shut his mouth tightly.

"Carter and the girl were taken from the hotel by some Chinks. This sleigh-rider downstairs says that no Chinaman would dare do anything like that unless the Tasi Wo OK'd it. Can you get that much?"

"I know that," growled Rogers. "Same as every one in the know in town does."

"Yeah? Well, do you know this also: that Chi-lu has a ranch over in the Hueco?"

"No, I didn't. What of it?"

"This of it: if the Tasi Wo has got Carter and this moll, where would they be apt to take them to get what they wanted?"

"Out there," answered Rogers. "Cut that hard stuff out, Pat. I only asked a question. You know damn well I'm with you."

"That's right," said O'Neill. "I know you're there, on your end, Bill. Now, here it is. Either we go out there and get the girl, or there's no cut in a million dollars' worth of jewels for us. That's all, Chinese tong or not. I'm not afraid of all the tongs here, or in China either."

"You and me both," said Rogers; and he wasn't.

"If they put up a fight, we'll claim—Wait a minute; we have no authority out of the city limits. I know the county dicks; we'll pick them up; they're right lads; and also a couple of other birds out there that will do as I say. That will be plenty. We go along as special deputies. Rescuing a kidnaped girl, get it? We'll knock this lad Carter off, if the Chinks haven't, along with any of the Chinks that are looking for it. On the way back she'll tell us where the junk is."

"Let's go," said Serroco, getting up. "Let's get the stuff and talk afterward."

"Hell of a joke," said Rogers as he rose, "if she's left 'em over in Mexico."

"It will be a tough joke—on her," said O'Neill grimly.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ON A BULLET-SPATTERED LEDGE.

THE girl lay full length at Carter's side peering over the ledge and watched the oncoming car appear and disappear as it climbed on the zigzag trail.

"If they are enemies," she asked, "what will you do?"

"Stand 'em off," Carter answered with a cheerful quirk of the mouth. "Better ease back a little."

"Why?" asked the girl calmly.

"Because you can't help me any, and you might get hit. There's room back there against the wall for you to get out of range, unless a bullet glances. I've only got the six shots in my gun and ten cartridges in the loops. That's the heck of a shoulder holster; you can't carry much. Get back—here they come!" commanded Carter.

"I'm not afraid of being hit. But if you say so."

The big touring car came around a bend and almost ran into the car across the trail. The driver slammed on all brakes and came to a grinding stop, the front wheels of the car almost touching the running board of the other.

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Seven men jumped out: O'Neill, Rogers, Serroco and four others. The four were hard-faced men, one with gray hair; the rest younger men, one hardly more than a boy. Around their waists they all had belts full of cartridges, and their holsters, now empty, hung low on their hips. Their guns were in their hands before they jumped. On the soft flannel shirts of two of them were badges.

For a moment they clustered near the car, the older man's eyes sweeping the surrounding hills. He saw the rock ledge and the narrow slitlike crevice, said something, and pointed to it. Then he and the other man with a badge started to walk directly up the hill toward it, their guns in their hands. All but two of the rest scattered out from the car and followed about fifty feet back.

"If it comes to shooting, get back of me as far as you can," Carter said.

The crevice was only four or five feet deep, about two feet high, and six feet in length.

"Oh!" the girl gasped. "It's the police! They are after me! Please don't let them take me!"

"They've got just as much chance as a snowball in he—hades!" answered Carter. "Ease over a little, so I'll have more room; and the moment any one raises a gun, you slide back."

The two men halted about twenty feet from the ledge, and the old one called:

"Well, come on out. We're officers of the law."

Carter's head showed over the ledge, and beside his right shoulder the muzzle of his .45 showed.

"Federal agent!" he called. "With prisoner. No help needed. On your way, gents."

The two men laughed. They were both deep in running across the line drugs and rum and anything else that paid. O'Neill had told them that the girl had over a million dollars' worth of precious stones. That word had been passed up from below the line, where she had tried to sell them in Mexico City.

Either one of them would have killed a dozen men, if they thought they could get by with it for one-tenth the amount. Now they were alone in the hills with the police they worked with—and only one man who said he was a Federal agent between them and their goal.

"Come down out of there," the gray-haired man commanded, "and show us your credentials if you're a Federal agent."

"I left 'em on the dresser at home," Carter said, "and I don't think Andy would like it if I came down. I've got to watch this ferocious prisoner. Go on away from here or you're liable to get those tin stars shot off you. You are interfering with a Federal officer."

"WE'LL do worse than interfere if you don't—"

The younger man, who had been standing with his gun held loose, suddenly flicked it up with a jerk of his wrist. It was fast, but the bullet that smashed his right collar bone and paralyzed his arm was also fast—so fast that he could not even pull trigger. His gun dropped from his hand and he went over backward.

Carter's gun slid out farther as he raised up on his left elbow. "Go ahead," he called to the other man; "I'll wait until it's in your hand."

The old gunfighter laughed. He was a killer with several notches on his gun and noted for his speed. And for that very reason, being what he was, he knew he would be dead the split second he drew—long before he could raise his gun to line it up with the head and shoulders of the man in the crevice.

"I ain't reachin', son," he said calmly. "You got it on me. Cut yore wolf loose."

"Put 'em up and walk up here, then."

The police guns and those of the

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two men who had remained near the car opened fire. Carter saw the guns go up, and promptly went down and back.

A hail of lead swept into the crevice and on the rock above and below. But the angle was a steep one, and all the bullets that came in spattered against the roof or went into the soft, crumbling rock.

One struck and glanced at a seemingly impossible angle. It hit Carter, who had covered the girl with his body as best he could. The bullet made a deep furrow across the calf. The first volley was followed by a second and a third; then silence.

"Closing in," Carter said, rolling away from the girl and inching forward a little on his stomach. "Reach in my back pocket and get my handkerchief and tie it around my leg."

The girl raised herself on her knees as far as possible.

"It's bleeding a lot," she said calmly. "Your handkerchief wouldn't be enough." Carter heard a rip. The girl had opened her dress and torn off a long strip of her silken undergarment. He felt the leg of his pants pulled up, then the tightening of a bandage.

"That's the girl. Plug it up."

His head as far as his eyes came over the edge. He stopped talking when he saw what the silence meant. Two of the men were climbing up on the top of the big touring car, which had been backed up a fairly steep slope on the other side as far as it could go without taking a nose-dive back. If they stood up it would give them a direct line of fire into the crevice.

The rest had found cover behind Henry's car and rocks.

Carter shot twice, and both men fell from the top. As he did, bullets once more whined past and all around him as the men under cover rose and shot directly at all that showed of his head and gun.

He drew back once more. "That's three anyway," he announced.

"You're wounded again," the girl said.

"Where? I don't feel it."

"There's blood from your cheek bone to your ear. It's dripping from your head on the side."

Carter put his left hand up to his head. "By gosh, some one darn near creased me. That isn't anything, only a scratch."

"But you are losing a lot of blood. Let me take the gun."

"Let you take it? My hat, woman, you're a prisoner. I'm all right. Pack some more stuff around my leg, that's a good girl. I'll hold these birds off—"

"What?" asked the girl, tearing some more silk loose and using his handkerchief this time. "What can help us, 'way out here? I—don't shoot all your cartridges away, Henry. Save one for me."

"Behave," said Carter. "I've got these gents stopped right now."

HE wiggled to the edge as he spoke and before he finished the sentence he knew he hadn't stopped them at all. The young man with the smashed collar bone was leaning over a rock, holding his gun with his left hand, and one of the men shot off the the automobile was under the car, firing also. The rest were closing in.

Carter shot and killed the man on the right who was a little in advance. It was Rogers, the police captain. As he shot he had to raise up a little and a bullet went into his left shoulder, high up. He shot again at the man running in the center, who was one of the men O'Neill had picked up. The man pitched forward on his face, then began to roll down the hill.

As Carter shot the second time another bullet tore through his right arm near the elbow.

The two men left in charge as the second one fell stopped and jumped for cover behind rocks.

Henry Carter, Federal agent, gunfighter by breed and instinct, reached

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slowly over with his left hand, in spite of the sickening pain in his left shoulder, and took the gun from his nerveless right hand. His lips were gray now, but tight. He dragged himself almost a foot farther out, slowly raised the gun, and killed the young man who was throwing lead at him with his left hand.

As Carter shot he tried to keep the same position to shoot at the man under the car, but slowly he began to sink down. He felt the girl's firm young arms close around his waist and pull him back. He saw her hand go out and pick up his gun and extend it over the edge.

"Load it," he muttered. He was sick now with a deadly nausea, and felt as if he were under a giant hammer which struck first one shoulder, then the other. "Cartridges in my strap."

"I know," said the girl calmly. "Don't try to talk. This is the end."

"Like hell," interrupted Carter thickly. "I'm just starting—I'll be all right—in—a—minute."

The man under the car fired three or four times, but his bullets were high and he knew he was doing no damage. Suddenly both men behind the rocks jumped up and ran down the hill to the car and behind it. One of them was O'Neill; the other one of the "county dicks." Serroco greeted them with a sneer. He had been hit in the leg and hurt, but was still full of fight.

"Nice game," he said. "That bird is like a cornered badger. He's got four of us and I'm shot to hell. What now, chief?"

"He's about all in," answered O'Neill. "I could see him get one, and I think he got another from the Waco Kid. We'll wait a little while, then go up, Mac and I. We got to, now. If we don't get him, it's finished as far as we go. Hang tight, old kid. I'll get the licker out of the car."

"We got to get him and the girl, too," said the other man.

"We will," promised O'Neill. "He is wounded now, and if we wait a little while he'll be in no condition to do any shooting."

Half an hour later, as they stood up, O'Neill's prophecy had proved correct. Carter lay unconscious, with his head toward the edge. The girl saw them rise, and, ignoring the bullets from Serroco's gun that whined around her, she waited for the two men to get within the distance she thought she could hit them.

## CHAPTER VII.

### ALL THE WOLVES ARE CUT LOOSE.

COLLINS sat in Major Combes's office. He had come directly there after the search of the hotel for the missing Carter.

"They were taken out the back way," said the major, after he had listened quietly to all Collins told him. "Probably within ten minutes after Carter got there."

"My gosh, the place swarms with Chinks back there," said Collins. "No one saw anything unusual."

"They wouldn't. It was Chinamen that did it, Sam," answered the major. "Henry gave me a line on the Chink angle."

The phone rang, and the major picked it up. "This is Major Combes talking. What? I can't understand—speak more plainly. That's better." He listened, his face impassive, then finally said, "Thank you," and hung up.

The cell keeper who had gone out for coffee after O'Neill and Serroco had grilled the Mex boy, was in the pay of Chi-lu. He had gone out to telephone the ranch of Chi-lu that the Mexican snowbird had told about it. He did not know that any one had been taken there, but he was getting a hundred dollars a month to repeat anything he heard regarding certain matters.

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The guarded phone conversation had been received by Chi-lu just as he was getting ready to start back to El Paso in another car. His clever Oriental brain at once connected things up. Chi-lu knew that all Federal men available must already be searching for Carter. If the Federals met the police, after being told that the police were on their way to kill Carter and take the girl, it might be that no more money need be paid by the Tasi Wo in certain quarters for services rendered.

Chi-lu smiled as he took up the phone to call for a Chinaman that lived in Hancock. Chi-lu delivered an order in rapid Chinese; then, as he started for El Paso with three others, gave instructions for the two men remaining at the ranch to go to the hills, leaving the ranch house open and empty.

The man he called in Hancock went out of his store, got in his car, and drove over to Eagle. From Eagle another man phoned Major Combes.

"Carter and the girl," the major told Collins, "were found lost up in the Hueco Mountains. Given a car by some one and started for the El Paso road." Major Combes opened a drawer, taking out a belt of cartridges from which swung a holster with a regulation .45 in it. "The police got the tip somewhere and have started out after them. The girl is thought to have a lot of jewels, and the police are after them. You pick up one or two men. We'll take my car. It may be like hunting a needle in a haystack."

"Not if Henry Carter has met up with those gents, it won't," said Sam, rising. "We will hear the ruckus. Only one trail down that mountain hits the main road. I'll get Jimmie Earp and Chick Absolom; that 'll be plenty."

O'NEILL, as he got closer to the ledge, saw it was the girl, and turned, shouting to Serroco to stop shooting. If the girl were killed, their chances to get the jewels would be utterly ruined. Serroco stopped and pulled himself up from the ground by holding on to the car. O'Neill did not advance any farther, and the man with him stopped also.

"Throw that gat out!" O'Neill barked. "Then come down. We know Carter is done. Better for you, girl."

She answered with a shot, but the heavy Colt .45 was too much for her little hand, and she couldn't hold it down on a mark. The bullet whined a dozen feet over O'Neill's head.

He laughed. "You damn little fool, we'll beat your head off if you—"

The girl shot again, at the other man, who had commenced to ease forward and to the right. She missed him also. As she shot, O'Neill ran directly forward. He was game, this crooked detective sergeant, no matter what else he was. The girl fired once more and missed him, then he was under the crevice. The other man was about twenty feet away on his right.

"Come in on the side," O'Neill ordered him calmly. "Don't kill her—knock that gun out of her hand. I'll go up at the same time."

His face was toward the rocks, and as he raised his foot to a crack he could see that the other man had halted and now had his back to the wall. At the same moment O'Neill heard the oncoming car and a shout of warning from Serroco.

He turned to see a car come to a halt within ten feet of the other two. Men were rising in the seats. O'Neill saw Major Combes and Sam Collins, on the front seat, raise their guns. In back were Jimmie Earp and Chick Absolom, gunfighters and United States deputy marshals.

He knew that there were no explanations possible, that he would not be given a chance to attempt any; and he did the only thing left for him to do—he raised his gun. Meanwhile Serroco whirled around like a top from the impact of the heavy lead bullets that were tearing through him. Major

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Combes and Sam Collins had both shot at him, and hit.

O'Neill fired at Chick Absolom, who had jumped out of the car. He was a good shot. But he was facing men who were dead shots at any range their guns carried. His bullet went into the car, missing Absolom by an inch.

The other man at the ledge managed to fire twice, then, receiving the direct fire of three guns, pitched forward on his face and lay still.

Absolom calmly raised his gun about his shoulder, then "threw down," and O'Neill slowly slid to the ground, dead.

MAJOR COMBES looked up as his door opened. "Well, for Heaven's sake, have they let you out, Henry?"

Carter grinned. It was rather weak, but a grin just the same. His face was much less tanned and he leaned a little on a stout cane.

"Sam Collins brought his car around to the back of the darn hospital, and I sneaked out," he said as he eased down on a chair. "I'm all right. My gosh, those darn doctors tell me I got to stay two more weeks. I just came in to tell you I had a nice time at your party."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," answered the major courteously, a twinkle in his eye; "and now you get the hell out of here and back there as soon as possible."

"Doggone it, I've been there a month now, and—"

"Never mind that 'and' stuff. I notified Washington that I detailed you on duty, and that your leave was to be canceled."

"That doesn't worry me," said Carter bitterly. "I never get the darn thing anyway. What happened to the girl?"

"If I tell you, will you go back to the hospital, you scoundrel?"

Carter knew that when the major began calling names he was pleased with the person thus addressed.

"Yes, sir, right away," he answered promptly.

"All right. Her name is Anastasia Mirovich, and she is the daughter of Prince Paul Mirovich of Russia, who used to be ambassador to China under the Czar. Her father died in Mexico City three months ago. Some old family jewels were all he had left of his former wealth. He told her to sell them and get to Paris, where some of the family were alive. She tried to dispose of them in Mexico City, but was only offered a tenth of their value. She was introduced by a Mexican to the bird you killed, Serge Volkonski. He posed as a Russian, but was part Chink, part God knows what. He told her that some men in El Paso had plenty of money and would buy them. She told him she had no passport and couldn't get over the line. He told her he would arrange for her to get over all right, and she was to meet him at that place we knocked off. She was afraid of a frame-up, and didn't bring the jewels, much to his disgust. He thought she had planted them somewhere in El Paso, but she hadn't—she had left them in Mexico City in a safety-deposit vault. When you came bursting in he was trying to get her to tell where they were. Now you know—beat it."

"Then, all there is against her is running the line?"

"That's all, and I fixed that up for what she did after you passed out in the crack. She's up with Mrs. Combes right now, waiting to see how you come out. If you don't get the hell out of here, I'll send her back over."

"Tell her I said to stick around," smiled Carter as he rose.

"I don't need to tell her; she intends to. Go on, keep moving."

AS Sam Collins turned into a street that led to the hospital he asked: "Feeling all right, you polecat?"

"Yeah, boy. Listen, Sam, turn to the left and go down Barton Street."

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"Why? By gosh, you better be getting back. You'll catch merry hell now from that red-head nurse. Say, there's old Station 86, Henry."

"I see it."

"Boy howdy, you ought to have seen the major go to the mat with the police department. That bird you shot off the car top with Serroco lived long enough to tell us all about it. Man, they ate crow pie in chunks. Where you want to go, Henry?"

"Down three more blocks, then to the right a couple. I want to go into the Southern Importing Company a minute."

"None of your foolin' around," said Sam suspiciously. "My gosh, you couldn't even hold a gun, you coyote. I'm going right in with you."

"No, you're not; you stay in the car. I got to deliver a message, that's all."

"Honest Injun?"

"Yeah, honest Injun."

"All right, but if—"

"No ifs about it—that's all I'm going to do, honest."

Chi-lu rose as Carter was ushered into his private office. As the door closed on the man who had bowed Carter in, Chi-lu said:

"You are?"

"Wang-sun Chia of the Tasi Wo."

Chi-lu bowed, but did not answer.

"I come," Carter went on, "to declare that the duty that would require honorable warfare has not come to pass. Therefore I request the honorable warfare be ended."

"It is ended, O honorable elder brother, at your request. No act has been done that would require the Two Heads to judge. I, Chi-lu of the South, declare that the honorable warfare between you, Wang-sun Chia, and the Tasi Wo, is ended. Will you honor me by taking refreshment?"

"No, not to-day, Chi-lu. I am overdue back at the hospital. A little later I will be glad to."

Chi-lu bowed again. "It will be an honor not deserved by me," he said. "If you will allow me, I will escort you to the outer door, O magnificent elder brother."

THE END.

## Copra

"COPRA" is one of those terms that bob up continually in the romantic yarns of the South Seas, but it is a word that many of us take for granted, like jib boom or mizzen spanker.

The substance itself is not half so glamorous as its name sounds. It is the dried, brown, putrid sun-dried pulps of coconuts, broken open by the natives, and allowed to harden in the hot sunshine. This drying process goes on for some three months, during which time the substance often becomes full of worms and beetles and other vermin.

In addition to being rather repulsive in appearance the odor of copra is not what one would expect to find in a boudoir. The natives of the islands have strong stomachs, as a visit to one of their huts would soon show, so they do not seem to mind the stench; and the sailors who must handle the stuff learn to endure the odor.

During the war copra was put to a multitude of uses. The acids that are derived from it were used for preservatives for foods and disinfectants, as well as going into some of the high explosives. In peace times its fibrous, tough qualities lend themselves well to the manufacture of linoleum.

*Ralph Haug.*

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*The cow-puncher slid off his horse and stooped over the body*

# Blood on the Snow

***Surrounded by an unwelcome swarm of roistering fellow newspaper men, Phil Deckert struggles to keep them and Dorrit Dolliver apart as his train hurries him toward Wyoming and disaster***


**By FRED MacISAAC**

***Author of "Big Man," "The Spectral Passenger," etc.***


## LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

PHIL DECKERT, all-around newspaper man, is thirty-seven, and hadn't realized he was slipping, until the managing editor, Brown, tries to take him off his job as star police reporter and put him on the copy desk. Phil, brought up with a start, quits his job, and proceeds to capitalize on his acquaintance and influence. Without telling them he has left the *Mercury*, he borrows from various bankers, politicians, grafters, and other self-seekers whom he has befriended or who think they can use him; and amasses one hundred thousand dollars, on sixty and ninety-day notes. He packs the money in his suitcase and starts for Los Angeles in a drawing-room, hoping to avoid observation until he has made a big profit, somehow, in the fast-moving Coast city.

Dorrit Dolliver, beautiful, brilliant, and discontented society girl who has been "out" seven years without finding a society man worth her attention, is the heiress to twenty millions; she cannot stand her empty life, but knows no other. She accepts an invitation to visit an old chum, who years before had eloped with her chauffeur, a cowboy named MacIntyre. Clair MacIntyre is living on his ranch in Wyoming.


**This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for June 1.**





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Deckert and Miss Dolliver have adjoining drawing-rooms, and happen to exchange a few words. She superciliously admits she has never heard of him, and Phil, who is too cynical to be high-hatted by any one, returns with perfect truth that he has never heard of her, and leaves her forthwith. She is astounded and not a little interested; for it is the first time in her millionaire existence that she has been snubbed.

Phil is leaning out the window at a Nebraska station, when three newspaper men, traveling on the train, recognize him—and, willy-nilly, force themselves upon him, settling down in his drawing-room for a poker session that is to last to Los Angeles. They suspect there's a story behind his mysterious trip, and are determined to ferret it out.

## CHAPTER VI.

### TREADING ON DYNAMITE.

FLANNIGAN had been a prize fighter before he broke into the newspaper business. He was a low-browed, flat-nosed, thick-lipped individual who never combed his coarse black hair, and who advertised his diet by specimens on his vest; but he was a keen reporter and wrote about boxing, football, and baseball in a delightful and original jargon.

Lufkin was a college man, once a football star, tall, good-looking, with pleasant manners. His forte was discussing sports ironically.

Miller was an all-around newspaper man who covered every sort of story, a brilliant writer, as skillful in his report of a murder trial or a society divorce as when he dictated a running story upon a big college game.

They were all good story tellers, full of animal spirits, generous, big-hearted, and normally delightful companions for a long journey. Phil was five or six years older than the oldest of them, but there is no age in the newspaper business until a man reaches forty or forty-five and suddenly finds himself relegated to the copy desk. That doom had fallen on Phil several years too soon.

That Phil was not delighted to see them and eager to keep open house for them never once entered their heads. Were the situation reversed, any of them would have turned over his drawing-room rejoicing at the chance to drink and play cards all the way across a great continent.

If Phil was on a big story, well and good, they would try to pry it out of him if possible, he knew; but he was not expected to be a grouch, and the quickest way to awaken suspicion would be for him to spoil sport. If he did have them ejected, he would lose their friendship and the word would go round New York that Phil Deckert was a rotter. Phil, though he had slipped out of the newspaper game unknown to all, still wished to be considered a good fellow.

His money was safe enough; these men would not dream of tampering with his bags, but he knew them and he was aware that they would glad-hand everybody on the train, and if any crooks were aboard they would be sitting into the game in Phil's drawing-room in no time at all.

The situation had its humorous side, although Phil yielded that reluctant acknowledgment. He had cleaned up in New York and made his get-away with the utmost secrecy. He had locked himself in his stateroom on the Twentieth Century Limited to Chicago and had not emerged until the train deposited him in the depot of the city by Lake Michigan. He had passed an anxious night on this train, had not dared to go out for breakfast even for another sight of the haughty princess in the next compartment, and now look what had happened! His stateroom was full and presently it would be overflowing with uninvited guests. Wish-



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ing that his destination be unknown, he was host to three New York newspaper men who were sure to write back, if they did not wire, that they passed the journey pleasantly playing stud in Phil Deckert's drawing-room.

Martin Fagin would hear the news within twenty-four hours of its arrival in New York, and Martin did not know that Phil had any intention of going West. Martin would investigate, discover that Phil had borrowed heavily right and left, and would immediately assume that he was making away with his five thousand dollars. Phil was certain Martin would not wait until the note was due. He would round up the other creditors, and sleuths would be on his trail before he had time to turn around. It was a situation that was calculated to drive to despair any honest man, and Phil wasn't sure he was an honest man any more.

There was worse to come. Joe Lufkin departed to get the suitcase filled with hooch and a couple of packs of cards, and when he returned he had company.

"Look who I found," he boasted. "Pete Remington, the celebrated riding cowboy, the richest actor in these United States and just yelping to give us his money. Pete, meet all the boys: Phil Deckert, who is giving this little party, yes, you are, Phil! Bert Flannigan, a no good son of a sea cook; and Beef Miller, the best little reporter in this train with three exceptions. Pete's got a drawing-room but his wife is in it and she likes to be alone. Mitt them, Pete."

Phil shook hands with the picturesque character who had introduced himself to Dorrit Dolliver, and then Pete pushed forward a companion.

"YEARS ago when I was sheriff of Bliss, Wyoming," announced Pete, "I used to have a lot of trouble with an ornery cuss by the name of Oke Jennings. I guess I must have taken Oke to the calaboose dozens of times when he overloaded himself and thought he ought to assassinate the leading citizens of the town. Oke and me emptied our guns at each other more than once, but I didn't shoot to kill and Oke was too stewed to hit anything unless it was what he didn't aim at. Oke, meet the newspaper boys, and take off your coat."

Oke Jennings was a dark man who, if he had not been dwarfed by Remington, would have been considered unusually large. He was much heavier than any of the reporters. He was quietly dressed, his clothes were well cut; had it not been for his Stetson hat he might have passed for a citizen of Chicago or New York. Phil noticed a peculiarity about him: one of his eyes was black and the other was brown. He wore a drooping mustache of jet black, but his black hair was streaked with gray.

"You boys don't want to pay any attention to Pete," he stated. "He's just a ham actor and is always trying to make people think he used to be a he-man. The time he was sheriff of Bliss it was a mining camp, and one night everybody left town to go to a new gold field. Pete overslept that night, woke up alone in the town, waited just long enough to elect himself sheriff and then moseyed after the mob. Only time he ever fired a gun he shot himself in the foot. I never carried a weapon myself. I'm a peaceable citizen and engaged in the cattle business. Pleased to meet you all."

"Have you got any money?" demanded Joe Lufkin.

"Yes, a few dollars."

"Take off your coat and sit down. Phil, ring for the darky and have him bring us a lot of ice and mineral water. Make a little room here. Phil, take your baggage down to my section, we can't be crowded." He pulled out the suitcase containing Phil's wealth and tossed it at its owner. Quaking to see it in another's hands, Phil grasped it eagerly, looked about and tucked it into



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the rack above the seats, then placed his big bag in the washroom.

He was fairly in for it. The porter brought campstools for those who could not be accommodated in the cushioned seats, set down a pail containing ice and half a dozen bottles of ginger ale and mineral water, and reached up for the suitcase.

"I'll take care of this, gents," he said. "It might fall down and bust open some of your brains."

"You let that alone," snarled Phil, then recovered. "There are no brains in this compartment."

"All right, boss, just as you say. I'll take out this other bag. It's right in your way in the washroom."

"Very well," he said more quietly.

"Attention, people," commanded Lufkin. "For the benefit of those that came in late, I want to explain that newspaper men are not in the class of film actors and cattle kings. There is a dollar limit on this game and the first bozo that suggests lifting it will be crowned by me with an empty bottle. This is a dealer's choice, but only legitmate poker hands go. No Hollywood palookas nor Wyoming ringdoodles. Get me?"

"Crying baby already," grinned Pete Remington. "Friends, the last time I played dollar limit I won five thousand dollars."

"You must have been playing with Jackie Coogan," snorted Flannigan. "This time, actor, you're going to lose that automobile headlight you wear on your finger."

"You can have it if you can get it," smiled Remington. "You babies from Broadway will have to go to work in the picture business to earn money enough to get you home. This Scotch isn't bad. Give me three cards."

DORRIT DOLLIVER in the adjoining compartment did not fail to become aware that there were doings behind the steel plate which separated the two drawing-rooms. Dorrit, in fact, had seen the greeting from the platform of Phil Deckert by his old college chums. She had heard the singing and the banging on the compartment door by which they obtained entrance.

She was aware that the other room had filled up, the hum of voices penetrated, though she only distinguished a word now and then, and suddenly she heard a whoop and a shout which she recognized as coming from the throat of the Remington person who had annoyed her at breakfast.

This Mr. Deckert kept queer company, she opined. For a person so dignified and distinguished-looking, he had strange friends. Those three rowdies on the platform and now the obstreperous film actor. They were drinking and playing cards, and she probably would see little of Mr. Deckert. It didn't matter, of course, but he might have been amusing. She opened a volume, a recent French novel, and tried to interest herself in it, but found it dull. The landscape which was flashing past her window was as stupid as it could possibly be.

Miss Dolliver had traveled by train and motored all over south and central Europe, through countries which had been cultivated for two thousand years or more and she compared this vast, flat, monotonous vista invidiously with the Old World, nor did she take into account that one hundred years before, this had been *terra incognita*. The slogan "See America First" had never made an impression on the people in her set; the vast majority were as ignorant as she of what lay west of the Hudson River.

They seemed to be having a good time in the next compartment; snatches of song, shrieks and bellows of laughter gave evidence of that.

As Fortune had a bad habit of favoring those who are in no need of her aid, Pete Remington soon had a pile of chips in front of him which advertised prosperity, while the three re-

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porters were already considering what plausible tale of expenses would draw more money from the counting rooms of their establishments.

Phil Deckert played with his mind on more important matters—his suitcase, and what prospects there were of opening relations again with the young lady next door; yet, as sometimes happens, he won a little, rather than lost. Mr. Oke Jennings was somewhat in the hole when the porter looked in to announce luncheon in the dining car.

"Send us in some sandwiches," commanded Remington. "This is better than making a picture. Can any of you newshounds ride horses?"

"Why?" they bit.

"I'll give you a job in Hollywood in my new film. You'll need it."

"This game has only started," snarled Miller. "This is my pot, Mr. Remington."

"Oh, I calculate to drop a pot now and then just to lead on suckers," grinned the movie cowboy. Phil, who had dropped his hand, saw a blue dress whisk by the open door and he knew that dress. She was going to luncheon. The suitcase was absolutely safe for awhile, in full view of all. No one would touch it. He could depend upon the reporters to protect his belongings if the strangers got inquisitive. If he went into the dining car he might get a chance to apologize. The smoke filled his eyes and throat, he didn't like the quality of the alleged hooch that was going around, and he yearned for fresh air. Time was when he could stick it out all day and all night in such atmosphere, but he must be getting old. The newspaper men were in their element, and his head ached.

He looked at the suitcase in the rack overhead. No one would dream of opening it.

"Lufkin, I appoint you my deputy," he said. "Mind the shop and act as host. I'm going to get some lunch. I wish you luck while I'm gone."

"Good riddance," retorted Lufkin blithely. "We'll get different cards now. If you see any good-lookers in the dining car, tell them I'm busy."

With some trepidation Phil started toward the rear of the train. After all he was taking a terrible chance, even though the suitcase was locked and the game in full swing. Pshaw, it was safe. He shrugged his shoulders and strode through the swaying train. By good luck he might be seated at the same table as Miss Dolliver.

LUCK was with him, for he found the girl standing in the corridor outside the dining car, with several others standing ahead of her. She glanced over her shoulder and favored him with a smile, not the Medusa one.

"Hello," she said blandly. Was it possible she was not offended by his withdrawal of the morning? "I was thinking of complaining to the management of the disorderly compartment next to mine but, since you are the proprietor, I'll lodge my protest direct."

Phil looked distressed. "I'm frightfully sorry," he said. "It was no fault of mine, I assure you. They just broke in and made themselves at home."

She smiled again rather ironically. "You must know them very well."

"I do, worse luck."

"Somehow I would not have supposed you on friendly terms with those young men. I saw them from the train window."

"They're sporting editors of newspapers in New York," he explained. "As I am a newspaper man myself—"

"You a newspaper man? A reporter?"

She lifted incredulous eyebrows.

He nodded. "Yes. At least, I used to be."

"Somehow you don't look as I supposed reporters did."

"Thank you. I used to be proud of being a reporter. May I ask what you do?"

"Do?" She looked puzzled.

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"I mean—er—do you work for a living?"

Dorrit laughed almost insolently. "Well, upon my word! Do you take me for a working girl?"

"Why not? I thought you might be in films."

"I do not happen to be employed in any business," she said with such hauteur that he should have been snubbed. Phil, however, did not snub easily.

"Many charming and interesting women are in business or on the stage," he said easily. "I hope you are not offended."

Dorrit decided not to be. "Not at all," she said amiably.

"Two places?" demanded the steward of the dining car. Those in front of them had mysteriously melted away.

"May I have the privilege?" he asked quietly.

"Otherwise I might have some such experience as I had this morning," she smiled. When they were seated she repeated the conversation, or rather the monologue, of Mr. Pete Remington.

"Good Lord," he exclaimed. "The fellow is in my drawing-room now, winning all the money. I don't think he meant to be offensive, Miss—er—"

"Dolliver," she said. Surely this time he would recognize her name!

"—Miss Dolliver." He didn't. "Pete is a naïve Western type. He used to be a frontier sheriff. Out here everybody speaks without an introduction, or so I have been told."

"The great open spaces where men are men," she smiled. "I knew he was harmless, but he was rather a nuisance. He seemed hurt that I did not identify him on sight. Are there any real cowboys left, do you think?"

"I'm not personally familiar with the West, but I believe that the cowboy as a picturesque character passed about a decade after the passing of the Red Man. However I understand that there are still huge ranches in Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas where vast herds range. I presume there must still be cowboys, but they probably ride Fords and listen in on radio programs."

"The old-fashioned kind were romantic," she sighed. "Since I have come West I shall be disappointed if I do not meet a few of them."

"Pete Remington is the real thing. He and Will Rogers and Tom Mix and the rest all used to ride the range, but now they are all getting rich in motion pictures or something of the sort. You'll have a chance to meet some real cowboys if you visit the movie studios in Hollywood. Now, as a newspaper man, I am sure I could arrange for you to go through the studios," he said proudly.

"OH, but I'm not going to Hollywood or Los Angeles."

She was secretly pleased to see that he was shocked at her information.

"I—I thought you were going through to the Coast with us," he mourned.

"No, indeed. I get off at some little station in Wyoming and take a branch line, or else I shall be met. I am going to visit a ranch owned by friends, at least the girl is an old friend of mine. I do not know her husband."

"I don't suppose I shall ever see you again," he said dolefully.

"Does it matter?" she replied indifferently.

He glanced at her. She was cutting her salad with a fork. Her manner was like her voice.

"Probably it doesn't to you, but I hoped to know you better."

"Why?" She lifted her eyes and gave him her Medusa glance. Now if Phil had known she was Dorrit Dolliver, heiress to twenty millions, and the most exclusive girl in New York, he might have been squelched as men of her acquaintance invariably were squelched by that look; but to Phil she was just a very pretty girl with a

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slightly swelled head, yet one who might be trained by a competent teacher to be a very sweet and charming person.

"Why?" he repeated. "Because I like you, darn it. You're the first girl that has interested me for ever so long and now you're going out of my life."

Dorrit to her surprise felt a warm tingle at his words. Lots of men had told her that they liked her, that they loved her, but the state of their emotions had not bothered her in the least. This person was a newspaper reporter, not only a nobody, but the objectionable type who had front doors slammed in their faces, yet there was something about him; perhaps it was his eyes or the touch of gray in his brown hair.

"We may meet some time in New York," she offered. "Of course I shall not return for several months. Before I leave I'll give you my New York address." Perhaps that would enlighten him as to her identity.

"Three months. But that's an awfully long time!"

"I'm afraid there is nothing we can do about it. Do you know that you are the first stranger with whom I have ever conversed?"

"I don't feel like a stranger at all," he assured her. "I feel as if I had known you an age."

She smiled almost coquettishly. "Why did you leave me in the corridor this morning?" she asked curiously. "You acted as though you had been affronted."

"I was angry—but I was just a jackass. Catch me leaving you now until I have to!"

The presentation of the luncheon checks seemed to indicate that necessity. Phil made to take both checks, and thought better of it. This curious girl might not be pleased. She settled his indecision by picking up her check and laying a bank note upon it.

"May I—do you suppose we might dine together?" he asked timidly.

"If we should happen to be going in together, perhaps." She started out of the dining car, with Phil following on her heels, while the train chose that moment to speed up so that they were too busy keeping their equilibrium to talk.

At the door of her compartment she smiled brightly and entered, shutting the door so Phil stepped back to his own drawing-room.

## CHAPTER VII.

### DINNER FOR TWO.

FOR half an hour Phil had forgotten completely his bag of treasure, but now he was shivering with fright. Suppose it had vanished. There it was, however, perched on its rack, while the game continued with unabated vigor and the room was so thick with tobacco smoke that it resembled London in a fog.

"Old mammy luck has been good to the New York boys," Joe Lufkin informed him. "We have been despoiling the Egyptians. Oke here has been raining money and old Pete isn't near so brash as he was."

"Game's young yet," said Pete cheerfully. "Hand Mr. Deckert a stack of chips and sew up your talk trap."

Considerably refreshed by the pure air of the dining car and his delightful chat with Miss Dolliver, Phil sat in and tempted fortune. As anybody who plays the old army game can testify, a dollar limit poker game is fairly stiff and it is an easy matter to win or lose a couple of hundred dollars in a few hours, but these men played skillfully and the cards were running evenly so up to date the casualties were not very heavy. Great damage had already been done to the contents of the hooch bag and Pete Remington made a trip to his drawing-room to bring up reserves.

The afternoon passed pleasantly enough, even for Phil, whose anxiety regarding his precious freight gradual-

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ly wore off. He had a little luck, too, for he happened to hold a full house, aces and queens when Remington, Lufkin, and Beef Miller thought well of their hands, and he raked in a pot containing sixty or seventy dollars.

About five o'clock the porter entered with ice and mineral water, and turned on the lights which glimmered strangely in the tobacco haze. It reminded Phil that it would soon be dinner time and he had a dinner engagement if he was lucky.

The players had been imbibing freely, but they were all experienced drinkers and they had settled down to the business of cutting one another's throats without the boisterous jocosity which had marked the early hours of the game. They hadn't budged for lunch and most likely they would not stir for dinner. Much liquor destroys appetites and sandwiches would suffice them.

Phil had been careful to abstain almost entirely from the liquid refreshments, for it would be horrible if the girl saw him the worse for liquor, and besides, the suitcase demanded mental alertness.

He wondered if he might knock on her door around seven o'clock and remind her of their half engagement; would she consider it a liberty? She was a curious girl, like none he had ever met, friendly when she felt like it, occasionally unapproachable; a type unknown to him and exceedingly fascinating.

He did not think he had fallen in love with her at such short notice—Phil didn't take much stock in love—but he knew that he was tremendously interested in her. She puzzled, alternately repelled and attracted him. There was something cold, almost hard about her, and something very sweet and genuine.

At seven he threw down his hand; he had lost two or three small pots in succession.

"I'm out for awhile," he declared. "I can't stand the strain the way I used to do."

"Poor old cripple," jeered Lufkin. "The white-haired reporter. Pretty soon you'll be covering assignments on crutches. What was that station?"

"Kimball, Nebraska," replied Pete Remington. "Pretty soon we'll be in Wyoming."

Wyoming? Good Heavens! The girl had said she was leaving the train in Wyoming. He must see her! Why, he did not even have her address.

He watched two or three hands, saw that the players were absorbed and slipped out into the corridor unnoticed. He tapped softly on her door and she opened immediately.

"Dinner time?" she asked brightly.

"If you are ready."

"I'm hungry," she said, laughing.

He quaked as they passed his stateroom lest some of the roughnecks fling a gibe at them, but the players were looking at their cards and nothing else. They worked their way rearward and found plenty of room in the dining car.

The steward took it for granted, now, that they would sit together and placed them at a table for two at the far end of the car. Phil felt he had known Miss Dolliver for an indefinite period. This time he thought he might venture to pay the check.

"I AM leaving the train at Medicine Bow, it seems," she said. "I looked at my ticket. The time-table says we arrive there at eleven."

"Just as we were getting well acquainted," he groaned. "I call that hard luck."

"I thought you might have called on me this afternoon," she said, surprisingly. "Cards, however, seem to have absorbed you."

"I didn't know if I dared presume," he answered sorrowfully. "I don't care anything about this game, but I didn't want to get in wrong with you by taking too much for granted."

"I was very bored," she said frank-

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ly, "and the hilarity in the next compartment did not tend to alleviate it."

"And now we are going to separate, and I may never see you again."

She smiled indifferently. "After all, we are the most casual sort of acquaintances. You have distracted me a little for which I am grateful, but we really have nothing in common. When I have left the train you will settle down to steady gambling, and I wish you lots of good fortune."

"I'll get those pests out of my compartment and settle down to thinking of you."

Her blue eyes turned cold. "Don't be absurd. Men of your age are not so easily affected."

"How old do you think I am?"

"Oh, perhaps forty-five."

Phil winced. So that was how she considered him—a fatherly old man.

"It's this gray in my hair," he said. "I am thirty-seven."

"Old enough not to be susceptible. I am twenty-five myself."

"Young enough to fall deeply and sincerely in love," retorted Phil. "Why so cynical?"

"I don't think I'm cynical. I have read much and have met many men and women and I think I view life judiciously. I have only heard of one really happy marriage, and I have my doubts about it. I am going to see if it is true," she said with a sudden impulse to confidence. "A chum of my school days married her father's chauffeur. They have been married seven years, and she writes me she is deliriously happy on a little ranch. If that were really so, I doubt if she would bother to have me out to spend a few months with them. I believe she is fed up with her husband's society?

"I don't," he said promptly. "I think she is so happy that she wants you to see how happy she is. Where do they live?"

"In—er—really, I don't remember. I have the address, of course. Some little town with a short name. They are going to meet me at Medicine Bow. That's a curious name, too; I never heard it before."

"It played a big rôle in frontier history," he said. "It was the scene of engagements in the Indian wars."

"Really? I never read much about Indian wars. The Indians were so horrible and the frontiersmen not much better, don't you think?"

Phil, who had reveled in the history of the building of the West, felt like slapping her. Curious how this girl both exasperated and charmed him. They talked and talked while the dining car filled and they were not yet at dessert when those whose business there was eating began to leave. The train slowed and came to a full stop. Phil glanced through the window at the station. "Laramie," he read. "We are at the top of the Great Divide."

A shout outside the window caused them both to look out. Below the window stood the three newspaper men and Pete Remington, drawn up in line; and the four, when they caught the eyes of the couple in the diner, gave them a military salute while they grinned from ear to ear.

Phil flushed with embarrassment, but Dorrit regarded the quartet with such a baleful gleam in her blue eyes that their half-drunken jocularity changed to discomfort. They moved unsteadily onward.

"They have been drinking heavily and they needed the fresh air," he tried to explain. "I am very sorry—"

"Don't apologize," she said with some amusement. "I think I dispersed them very neatly, don't you?"

A warning whistle caused the passengers on the station platform to climb back on the train, which began to move slowly. The dining car at the rear would be dropped presently and the train was traveling rapidly as it cleared the station. Glancing out, Phil saw an automobile turn into the road parallel to the track, saw a man lean out and

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wave toward the express, and recognized him suddenly as Oke Jennings. The road turned abruptly, the back of the auto presented itself and the train, at full speed, swept into open country.

"I beg your pardon," he said. Miss Dolliver had made some remark. He had been wondering about Jennings, but he remembered that he had only assumed that the man was going clear to the coast. That explained why there were only four poker players walking on the station platform. Jennings had waved good-by to them from the automobile.

The steward presented one check this time, which Phil paid mechanically. Dorrit made no protest.

"We are the last in the car," she said. "Let us go back."

Again he followed her to her drawing-room. "I must pack my bag now," she said in dismissal. "I am getting off in a couple of hours."

"May I come in to see you for a little while later?"

She nodded. "Yes, if you like."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### CATASTROPHE.

HE turned to his own drawing-room. The three newspaper men were disposed about it. Cards and chips had disappeared. Their countenances were glum.

"You were lucky," Lufkin informed him. "The Bad Man of Bodie got us to lift the limit for the last few hands because he was getting off at Laramie, and he flayed us alive. You see before you three journalists in dire distress. He took his old friend Pete, too, and Pete has gone to explain things to his wife."

"Serves you chumps right for playing with strangers," Phil said unsympathetically. "You got stewed and were ripe for a trimming. I take off my hat to our old friend Oke."

He dropped into a seat and his eyes automatically lifted upward. He looked straight at the suitcase on the rack. The rack was there, but the suitcase was not.

There are emotions which nobody can possibly describe. A man who fell over the edge of the Grand Cañon probably experienced some such sensations, as did Phil Deckert at that moment, only the other's emotions didn't last so long, for in a certain number of seconds the man who fell over into the Grand Cañon was dead.

Phil felt as if his chest was crushed in, as if he were strangling, as if he had been hit by an eight-cylinder automobile going eighty miles an hour. He felt that he was going to drop dead from heart failure.

"Come on down into the club car," suggested Miller. "We can't play any more poker because Deckert is too wise to take our I. O. U.'s, and this confounded drawing-room oppresses me. Coming with us, Phil?"

"No," he managed to articulate. "No."

"Go to the devil, then," retorted the newspaper man. "Come on, boys. A change of scene will do us good."

"Wait a minute," Phil babbled. "What—what—er—where is my suitcase?"

"What suitcase?"

He pointed to the rack.

"Oh," said Miller. "That. Hanged if I know. I never noticed it."

"Are you fellows kidding me?" he pleaded. "Come now. What did you do with it?"

Joe Lufkin glowered at him. "We had something else to do beside hide your confounded traveling bag. We were too busy getting rooked. Come on, gang."

The trio departed, leaving the unhappy man alone. He knew perfectly well that they had not touched his suitcase, his questions were just hopeless ones, cries of despair. What had happened to it. Maybe the porter—

He pressed the bell frantically, the

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meanwhile he hunted high and low in the restricted quarters of the drawing-room.

"You rang for me, boss?" smirked the negro at the door.

He pointed accusingly at the rack. "Did you take that?"

"I suttinly did not, boss," said Sam, shaking his head. "I was goin' to put it away, sah, but you done tol' me to let it alone."

"All right," he sighed, and the porter withdrew. It simply could not have vanished like this. It was too perfectly horrible. Maybe Remington knew something. Phil rang again and asked for the number of the picture star's drawing-room.

Supplied with it, he dragged himself two cars forward and knocked. Pete, beaming, opened. "Hello, Phil," he boomed. "Come in and meet the missis."

"Not now," he groaned. "Did you notice the suitcase I had on the rack over our heads?"

Remington shook his head. "Guess not. I saw a suitcase there when we came in this morning. Why?"

"I can't find it."

"It 'll turn up," encouraged the ex-cowboy. "Sure you won't come in?"

"No, thanks," he gulped.

ON his way back he solved the mystery. Jennings was getting off at Laramie. He had lifted the limit of the game and cleaned out the crowd so they all were glad to get out on the platform in the station. The drawing-room was empty, the idiot who should have been guarding his possessions was in the dining car absorbed in a girl who was making use of him only to kill time.

In some way Jennings had come to suspect that there was something valuable in the bag, probably because Phil had made a fuss when the porter tried to touch it. He had slipped in and carried it off. Jennings was a crook. He had lifted the limit on the game and probably rung in a deck of marked cards on the guileless youths from Broadway. He had stolen the suitcase beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Stop him? The train suddenly swayed as the engineer enthusiastically pulled wide the throttle and Phil grasped at the corridor railing for support. Every minute he was being carried a mile farther from Laramie, while the thief was speeding away from that city in a motor car.

Stop the train! He would pull the emergency cord and jump off. In the darkness he could lift up the trapdoor of one of the vestibules and escape from the irate train crew. But he would land somewhere in the open country, ten or fifteen miles from Laramie, three or four hours' walk. And suppose Jennings had not taken the bag? Suppose it was still on the train. He must make sure of that. But the porter knew nothing, the boys had denied knowledge, Pete Remington said he hadn't noticed it. Who would take it? Why should anybody touch it? No human being save himself knew what it contained.

He reëntered his drawing-room and flopped upon the seat. He was very faint, cold drops of sweat were standing on his brow, which he wiped off with the back of his hand.

*Zizziboom - zizziboom - zizziboom!* chanted the express as it tore through the night. He laughed hysterically, for he remembered a story; he had thought it was funny at the time. An old and whiskered Hebrew sat in a train coach and rocked to and fro and wailed miserably. Nobody paid any attention to him and he moaned all day and the second day. On the third day the conductor thought that even the death of a relative did not justify such anguish and, touching him lightly on the shoulder, he asked, kindly: "What is the matter?"

*"Oi, oi, oi!"* groaned the poor old man. "For three days now I've been on the wrong train!"

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Every second Phil delayed widened the gap between him and the bag. He had lost his borrowed capital; his future, his liberty, everything depended upon its recovery, yet here he sat impotent, helpless, grinning stupidly at a tragic joke.

He grasped the time-table, which was in plain sight protruding from the pocket of his overcoat and feverishly turned its pages until he came to the schedule of the Los Angeles Limited. They had left Laramie at nine thirty. No scheduled stop till Rawlins at twelve thirty.

That bell cord! If he was caught he would have to explain, and how could he explain the loss of one hundred thousand without exposure? The reporters would wire the story to New York and his whereabouts and the disappearance of his capital would be known to his creditors the following morning.

Think quick and straight now. He used to be considered a good sleuth and here was a job for him. His life depended on it or, at least, his freedom. Be cold-blooded. How would he go about finding Jennings if the thing were a news story, not a personal emergency?

Remington had introduced and vouched for the fellow. The first thing to do would be to question the movie star. Again he moved forward through the train and knocked on Remington's door.

"HELLO," said Pete. "Back again? My wife has been jawing at me for leaving her alone all day. Come on in."

This time he allowed himself to be dragged inside, where he was introduced to Mrs. Pete, a blond young lady, whose eyes alone betrayed that she was not so extremely young.

"Bad men," she said—baby talk—"to keep my great big hubby playing cards and drinking liquor and leaving his poor little wify alone."

Phil restrained himself from strangling her, and smiled, painfully.

"Pete," he said. "It occurred to me there might be a story in Jennings. Surviving bad men, you know."

"Oh, he never was very bad," scoffed Pete. "I was kidding about him shooting up the town."

"Where does he live?"

"You can search me. I hadn't set eyes on him for fifteen years when I met him in the club car."

"Do you think he cheated at cards?"

"Naw. You wouldn't have to cheat to take those newspaper kids. I happened to have hard luck or I'd have cleaned Oke myself."

"Do you know where he was going when he left the train?"

"Didn't say. He's got a ranch somewhere up-country, so he told us."

"No idea where it is?"

"None in the world. Somewhere in Wyoming, I suppose."

"Well, I'm much obliged. Guess there's no story in him."

Hunting for a needle in a haystack, he thought bitterly as he returned to his place. It was all his own fault. He should have stuck in the game and watched his property instead of taking preposterous chances for the sake of talking to that girl.

He glanced at his watch. Half an hour had elapsed since leaving Laramie. Twenty-five miles to town now, a day's walk if he couldn't get a conveyance. His hands were shaking, his lips were twitching, but he tried to compose himself. Was there any other possibility besides the guilt of Oke Jennings? He might go after the boys and question them seriously, but to question them would only awaken their ready suspicion. A suitcase of that size couldn't contain anything of great value; it was not big enough for evening clothes. Suppose somebody did walk off with it, they would ask why be so distressed? He was confident from their manner that they were not framing him.

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What was going to happen if he did not recover the suitcase? Where would he go? What would he do? A debt of a hundred thousand dollars was fastened on his shoulders. He would not earn enough to pay it off in two lifetimes. He knew now that he would never have gambled with that money, for he was not of the stuff from which criminals are made. He would have looked around for a sure-thing investment in Los Angeles, found nothing and meekly returned the borrowed cash and gone into debt to meet the interest due on it. Why had he ever given way to the insane impulse to go out and raise the wind on his reputation? And now what was going to become of him? He must vanish, hide for the rest of his life from those who had once respected him.

Well, he would find this Jennings and get back the money, then he would travel back to New York and return it immediately. In that way he would reduce the interest to a figure he could meet. He'd take the desk job on the *Mercury*. He'd be content to live stupidly and die in poverty; anything to get back where he had been a fortnight ago. What was that?

The grind of air brakes told him the train was slowing down. No stop was scheduled, but they might stop on signal or to take on water. He grabbed his overcoat and thrust his arms into it. He looked for his second suitcase, but remembered that the porter had carried it off.

## CHAPTER IX.

### ON THE TRAIL.

PHIL darted out of the drawing-room and made his way to the vestibule without encountering the porter. The train was moving slowly, and he pressed the spring which caused the steel trap covering the car steps to rear itself. He descended the steps and waited. A full stop, and he let go in the dark. He did not land on solid earth but on gravel, and slid down a short embankment. He picked himself up unhurt. Almost immediately the train began to move again, and in a second he was looking at its very tail lights and the observation platform, vacant because the air was very sharp.

The die was cast. He was no longer on the Los Angeles Limited, but standing in a field somewhere in Wyoming, probably thirty miles from Laramie. Ahead he saw a few dim lights and the shadow of a huge watertank on stilts. The train was already several hundred yards distant.

"Only thing I could do," he muttered. It entered his head that Dorrit Dolliver would be surprised and perhaps chagrined when he did not come to visit her as he had suggested and when he was not on hand to bid her good-by when she got off the train at Medicine Bow. What did he care? It was her fault that he was in this predicament. At his age, to make a fool of himself about a girl, and especially such a cold proposition as that one! He started for the little station but paused a moment to reflect.

When the boys came back from the club car they might look in, but if he was not in his drawing-room they were apt to suppose he was with the young woman with whom they had seen him dining. They would turn in and not bother about him until morning. The porter would clean up the room and make up his berth, but would not be expected to tuck him in. Miss Dolliver, if he were not on hand when she left the train, would not make inquiries, that was certain.

It might be that his absence from the train would not be discovered until it reached Ogden, Utah, where it was due at nine thirty in the morning. Ogden, he knew, was four hundred miles from Laramie. Anywhere along that four hundred miles he might have left the train. The first porter who found the vestibule trap open would shut it

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and keep quiet lest he be accused of carelessness. It would be like looking for a person somewhere between Boston and Washington.

It was certain that he must consider himself a fugitive if he did not find Jennings and take the treasure away from him; and it was to his interests that he be a fugitive until he got his money back. On the other hand, he had to go somewhere. He might be able to hire a car at the tank station to take him back to Laramie and the quicker he got on the trail of Jennings the better chance he had, a slim chance at best, he admitted.

He must risk the operator at the station wiring ahead. He must hurry after Jennings. He walked over rough ground a couple of hundred feet and approached a small shedlike structure where a light dimly burned. There was no town here, he saw, just two or three one-story shacks, all dark. He reached the station door as a man was locking it.

"Look who's here?" demanded the agent. "Where did you spring from?"

He had a story ready. "I got carried past Laramie and got off the Limited here. I thought I might get a car to take me back."

"You should have gone on to Rawlins," said the agent, who was very young and not very bright. "There is nothing in this God-forsaken place. You're stuck, fellow."

"Any trains back?"

"Nope."

"Not even a poor broken-down Ford?" he pleaded.

THE agent considered. "I've got a flivver. It 'll go, but that's all you can say about it. It's about a hundred years old."

"Will you take me down?"

The youth shook his head.

"Got to be back here in an hour. A west-bound freight stops for orders, and an hour after that another west-bound express. It's a single-track road and it works pretty hard, I can tell you. No, I'm on the job all night."

"I've got to get to Laramie. An important engagement."

"I'll send a wire for you."

That would never do, he thought. "No, I've got to be there in person. Will you sell me your car?"

"I wouldn't take fifty dollars for that piece of junk, no, sir."

"Give you seventy-five."

"Nix."

He was desperate. "A hundred."

"Friend, you bought a car," said the agent humorously. "If you're lucky she'll take you to Laramie, but she ain't got any lights. You got to be careful not to get off the road. I'll loan you a lantern."

He led his customer to a shed behind the station, lit a lantern and showed Phil the most woeful specimen of a rattletrap that ever fouled a spark plug.

"Will the thing really go?" Phil demanded in dismay.

The boy laughed. "Yes, sir. She'll go, but she makes the most terrible noise, so you think she'll fall apart every minute. Every nut and bolt is loose, I guess, and all the fenders shake with the ague, but she'll get you into Laramie unless something unexpected happens. The tank's full of gas and that don't leak—much. Oh, you'll make it, I guess."

Phil accepted this rather doubtful assurance and climbed in, to find the seat cushion in as much disrepair as the rest of the contraption. The station agent hung the lantern on the radiator cap and received two fifty-dollar bills with manifestations of pleasure.

"I know where I can get a good car for this," he declared. "Maybe you can sell the thing for fifteen or twenty dollars in Laramie and get some of your money back, mister. I'm almost ashamed to take it."

"How about the road?" he asked anxiously. "Am I likely to lose my way?"

"No, siree. There's only one road

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and if you get off it you'll know it 'cause you'll be in a ditch. You got to go slow because the lantern won't light you more'n a dozen feet ahead."

Phil stepped on the starter which shrieked to high heaven but, miraculously, started the engine. He knew how to run a Ford. It was the only type of car he had ever driven, and he headed the ancient institution in the direction indicated by the agent.

He found himself on a dirt road and was able to proceed by the dim light at the rate of about twelve miles per hour. It was an open touring car and soon, despite his winter overcoat he became sensible of the severe cold. At this time there was apt to be a foot of snow on the ground hereabouts, but it happened to be an open season so far.

The groaning and creaking and spitting and croaking and muttering of the car affected his nerves for a time, but later he got more or less used to the racket and was able to contemplate his situation—which was worse for his nerves than the car.

THE State of Wyoming, he had read somewhere, was about as big as the German Empire, at least that was his recollection. It was about four hundred miles east and west by something like three hundred miles north and south, and contained as many people as a second-rate city in the East. He was chasing a man who expected pursuit and knew the State as Phil knew New York City; and Jennings might not intend to remain in Wyoming at all.

Thanks to Phil's forethought, the contents of the suitcase were perfectly negotiable, one hundred thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills, unmarked in any way, legal tender wherever the starry banner floated, and quickly exchangeable into the coin of any realm in the world. To accuse the man of theft would involve explaining why he carried a sum of money in this fashion, and would broadcast to his creditors that he had lost his borrowed capital; also it would notify them of his whereabouts.

If the money was lost for good he must be lost with it. The thing was man to man, himself against Oke Jennings; crook gambler and Western badman *versus* a good New York reporter as much out of his element as a codfish in the Rocky Mountains.

The moon rose, which enabled him to see a little better, and the car was moving easily now, up a gentle grade. Though Phil was not aware of it, he had dropped off the train within a few miles of the top of the Continental Divide, eight thousand feet above sea-level. It explained the bite of the night air. This was in no sense a mountain road, however; there were few curves; a thousand-foot climb in thirty miles is not a steep grade in the Far West; sometimes the slope was imperceptible to him, sometimes he climbed a long hill to coast down a gentle decline.

He passed through hamlets on the railroad, the names of which he did not know. The car climbed poorly, but in two hours, he entered a good-sized town which informed him of its identity by an electric sign, "Laramie," in the outskirts.

Although in no mood to appreciate rural or urban scenery, he recognized that Laramie was a smart, up-to-date little place, and not so little at that. The streets were wide, well-lighted and paved. He passed a pretentious movie house and a good hotel. He quickly reached the other side of the town.

Well, he had arrived, some three hours after Oke Jennings had descended in Laramie from the express; and now what was he to do? If Jennings had remained in the city his chances of encountering him were good, for it could not contain more than ten thousand inhabitants, and in such a community it is hard for people to hide from one another. But Jennings had been in an automobile, and probably had left the city. Being conscious that

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he was a thief and that pursuit was possible, it was unlikely that he would remain in Laramie. This was merely the starting-point of a chase which might end anywhere.

Phil turned his snorting steed and rumbled back along the main boulevard until he came to a hotel which looked as though it might be the best in town, the Parker House. Across the street was a garage into which he rolled the antique, too preoccupied to be shamefaced. The night man met him with a broad grin, but handed him a check for the vehicle and climbed in to park it. He stepped on the gas, there was a roar, an explosion, a cloud of smoke forced its way out from under the hood and one of the front wheels fell off.

Even Phil had to bellow with laughter while the garage man climbed hastily to the ground.

"TAKE this blamed thing out of here," the garage man growled.

"Not I," retorted the newspaper man. "I have your check. Keep it."

"But what in hell will I do with it?"

"Sweep it up and throw it in the ashcan," he retorted, then beat a hasty retreat. The poor old thing had done its job and then fallen apart like the wonderful One-Horse Shay dramatized in Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem, which ran a hundred years to a day and then disintegrated.

He had squandered a hundred dollars on it, whereas he might have gone on to Rawlins, and returned to Laramie by train in the morning. Meanwhile, what could he accomplish in this strange town which was already going to bed? He went across to the Parker House and asked for a room and bath, and was forced to pay three fifty in advance because he had no luggage.

In his room, which was clean and well-appointed, he pulled off his overcoat, threw his hat on the bed and dropped into a chair in a mood for which the adjective despondent is utterly inadequate. He had five hundred dollars in his clothes when he left the train, a few dollars more than that, for he was fifteen or twenty ahead on the poker game. One hundred had been spent for transportation to Laramie, and he would be lucky if a junk dealer gave him ten dollars for the remains of the Ford.

Even supposing he came face to face with Jennings—what could he do?

He would accuse the man of taking his suitcase and the fellow would deny it. It was certain he would not be carrying the bag in his hand; by this time its contents had been removed and deposited in a safe place by the thief.

If what Pete Remington said about him was not entirely josh, Oke Jennings had been a gunman and probably carried a weapon still. While the old lawless days in Wyoming were gone, or were supposed to be gone, Jennings might not hesitate to use a gun in an emergency, while Phil was unarmed, and unskilled with weapons if he had them. He was strong, but he doubted if he could best Jennings in a rough and tumble, for the man had appeared very powerful. Nevertheless, he would find him and when he found him he would tackle him.

There was one thing in his favor. Jennings, finding the suitcase full of cash in hundred-dollar bills, might assume that their owner was an embezzler who would be afraid to make a fuss about their loss. If Phil was contemplating leaving the straight and narrow path, he had not yet taken the step, and in the eyes of the law was the legal owner of the treasure, so, if he were assured of the location of the money, he could at the worst, call in the authorities to impound it. Jennings might not think it necessary to cover his trail if he thought he had stolen from a thief, and this might work to Phil's advantage.

He washed his face and hands, then descended to the lobby which was deserted save for the clerk and a bellboy

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who was sitting at the telephone desk.

Phil sauntered to the desk and leaned on it confidentially.

"I wonder if you ever heard of a man in these parts named Oke Jennings," he remarked.

The clerk, who was going over some accounts, did not look up.

"I reckon I have," he said.

"Any idea where I might locate him?" Phil asked.

"Sure. Just turn around. He's coming through the street door."

## CHAPTER X.

### FACE TO FACE.

SWINGING about, Phil verified the statement of the clerk. Mr. Oke Jennings had indeed come into the lobby, was walking toward the desk, and was now regarding Mr. Deckert with an air of astonishment but not of apprehension.

"Holy hoptoad!" he exclaimed cordially. "Where did you spring from? I thought you would be halfway to Ogden by now."

There was no suspicion in his curious eyes, just perfectly natural surprise. His hands were empty, no suitcase dangled from one of them to be snatched away by an irate owner.

"You're surprised to see me," stammered Phil. What should he do or say? Suppose the man was innocent? Suppose the suitcase was still on the train? Suppose anything!

Mr. Jennings was extending a cordial palm and Phil reluctantly put out his hand. "I understood you was bound for Los Angeles," said Jennings. "The other boys certainly thought so because they were gloating about using your drawing-room all the way, and I didn't see no signs of your leaving when I dropped off the train."

His manner was absolutely perfect, and Phil, who flattered himself he knew when a man was sincere, was stumped.

"The boys took a lot for granted," he muttered. "I was getting off here, but I didn't let them know. I'm a newspaper man, Mr. Jennings," he continued, growing glib as he made up his story. "Those fellows are from rival newspapers and naturally I couldn't take them into my confidence. I just took French leave. I—I thought it was a good joke to let them think they would have the run of my drawing-room all the way."

Jennings chuckled. "Good joke, all right. It's funny I didn't see you get off the train when I did."

"I was saying good-by to a girl."

"Yeh? The one in the next compartment? A right pretty trick. Going to be long in Laramie?"

"Not long, I hope," he said.

"It's a nice town. I'll be moving on myself to-morrow."

"Where do you live, Mr. Jennings?"

"About a hundred miles. I got a ranch up country. Look here, Phil," he said.

They had been using first names in the poker game. "S'pose you and me have breakfast together. 'Bout eight o'clock? That all right?"

"Why, yes, I guess so."

"Gimme my key, old man," he demanded of the clerk, and Phil saw that the key was taken from box 33.

"Going to turn in. Train riding always tires me out," said Jennings apologetically. "Good night."

"Good night," Phil succeeded in forcing himself to utter.

Jennings entered the elevator and Phil went over to a far corner of the lobby and sank into a chair.

Mentally his legs had been kicked from under him. If this man had stolen his bag of money, he was the finest actor that Phil had ever seen, and he had seen them all. He had certainly no expectation of finding Phil Deckert in the lobby of the Parker House, and to be confronted suddenly by a person whom he supposed to be a hundred miles away and getting farther at the rate of a

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mile a minute should have daunted him if he were guilty of making off with that person's belongings; yet he had not been perturbed. What surprise he exhibited seemed perfectly natural.

He had accepted Phil's lame explanation without question, possibly had believed it—for, to the outsider, the newspaper reporter is always behaving unaccountably. His friendliness seemed genuine, too.

Phil had seen him in an automobile, and assumed that he was leaving Laramie immediately, had taken it for granted that he would put as much distance between himself and the railroad as possible. Instead of that Jennings appeared to have gone to the principal hotel, registered, spent the evening perhaps at a picture show, and was now retiring for the night with a clear conscience. Yet he had cheated at cards, lifted the limit and cleaned up his fellow players before leaving the train.

BUT had he cheated? The reporters thought so, but Pete Remington who was a veteran poker player and an old acquaintance of Jennings, himself a heavy loser, had not considered it in that light. What more likely than that Jennings, knowing he was leaving the train, wished for a little excitement during the last half hour and had been fortunate enough to win?

Phil had not trusted him, but his chief cause for suspicion was that the man had eyes of different shades; a poor reason indeed. And he had assumed that Jennings had stolen his bag because the opportunity had been his. A few seconds before the train departed from Laramie he had seen the other four players on the platform empty-handed. They had left the compartment untenanted, and somebody else might have carried off the bag.

Phil cursed himself for not questioning his friends regarding the luggage in the hands of Jennings, whom they had probably escorted to his automobile. It was too late to do that now. The bag might still be on the train. Having noticed the tender regard he had for the suitcase on the rack, the newspaper humorists might have hidden it after all and then denied it to make him sweat. It was possible.

On the other hand, assuming the correctness of the theory which had induced him to leave the train at the water-tank station, Jennings was the thief. The man was hard-boiled, experienced, and had a poker face. Having escaped from the train with the theft undetected, and being known in Laramie, he might have considered that the boldest course was the safest. He had had gone to the hotel, registered, spent the evening pleasantly, and returned for a night's sleep, intending to continue on his way in the morning exactly as if he were innocent. He had come face to face with the owner of the bag, yet had the *sang-froid* to carry it off. In that case he knew exactly what Phil was doing in Laramie, and would be prepared for eventualities.

As Phil sized it up, the chances were that Jennings was not the thief, but there was a possibility that he was guilty, and it was up to him to make sure of the matter one way or another. He had to get into Room 33 and make a search. Jennings probably would be expecting a visit, in which case the amateur burglar would get a bullet in his body. Even in New York, to shoot a housebreaker is not considered a crime, and in Laramie a jury would acquit Jennings with the thanks of the community.

In the old days Phil had taken some big chances, but he recognized that this was the most foolhardy enterprise which he had ever considered. If Jennings were innocent, he would be asleep, and the search might be conducted safely, but fruitlessly; but if the bag containing the thousand century notes were in the room, the old-time bad man would be on guard.

How would Phil obtain an entrance? The man would lock his door and



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leave the key on the inside. As it was winter, his windows would be closed and probably locked.

Phil sauntered over to the desk and asked for some writing paper, while a swift glance informed him that there was a second key to Room 33 in the letter box of that number. Nodding good night to the clerk, he entered the elevator, and ascended to the fourth floor. His own room was No. 42.

His plan was forming in his mind. He must wait until say 3 A.M., when, it was to be hoped, Jennings would be asleep. He would descend to the lobby by the stairs. Either it would be entirely deserted or there would be only one watchman on duty, and opportunity might be given him to steal the second key. If the watchman were awake and alert, he didn't know what he would do; but he thought the man would probably be asleep on post. Why not? Nothing in the world to keep him awake.

In his own room he prepared for his vigil, seated himself in a straight-back chair. His watch said eleven. Three hours, better four hours, before he dared make a move. He spent the time bemoaning the chain of circumstances which had brought him to this pass as the minutes dragged along. The chair was most uncomfortable, and he shifted finally to an armchair, kicked off his shoes, and rested his stockinged feet on the bed.

He had nothing in the room to read, and it was too late now to secure anything at the news-stand. He was alone with his thoughts, his plans, and time went so slowly, so slowly, so slowly.

## CHAPTER XI.

### RIDING DOUBLE.

THERE had been a dance at Garrett, and cow-puncher Billy Barlow had been there; he was always an attendant at dances if they occurred within a five or six hours' ride of the Diamond Dot ranch house. He was riding home now, two hours behind him, two hours to go, dog-tired, shivering a little, for it was raw and damp and beginning to snow. His horse had slowed to a walk, for they were making a grade.

Rough as the road was, motor cars made use of it. One had roared past him half an hour back, coming from God knows where.

But there was always sufficient time to get out of the way of a car approaching.

It would be four or five in the morning when he crawled into his bunk at Diamond Dot.

He was the only member of the outfit who had ambition enough to go to the dance; a lot of old fogies they were.

Billy Barlow was young and full of pep, and he had ginger in his heels. He had danced from eight thirty to twelve, and he hadn't been a wall-flower once, though there were twice as many men as girls at the party in Garrett Town Hall. None of those girls interested him much, though they were good-natured and a few of them were pretty.

Billy was nearly thirty years old, and he wanted to meet a certain girl. In his mind she was pretty completely classified.

If he was ever to encounter his ideal, it would have to be at a dance; for there were no women at Diamond Dot, save that tomboy Nellie, nor were the women at near-by ranches the sort that appealed to him. Such girls as he had in mind existed, for he saw their pictures in theatrical magazines and Sunday newspaper supplements; and some day he would encounter his.

His pinto suddenly sunfished and snorted. Unconsciously Billy had been nodding as he rode. He patted the pony's neck and urged him forward, but the animal continued to snort, and Billy thought he discerned



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a dark object in the road. Billy slid off his horse, approached gingerly, stooped, and touched the body of a man.

With an ejaculation of astonishment he straightened up, drew out a match, lighted it, and cupped his hands. When it flared, he bent over and lifted the face of the man in the road.

A stranger, without an overcoat, dressed in what Billy called "store clothes."

Billy was a powerful man, but he had all he could do to lift this fellow to his feet after ascertaining that he was not dead. The man's legs kept buckling, and the cow-puncher held him upright by passing an arm under his shoulders and slapping him roughly across. He puzzled the while. On a side trail fifty miles from the railroad, hatless, clad like a tenderfoot—what was this man doing here? The night was cold, a few flakes of snow were in the air; the fellow was unconscious, and would soon have frozen to death.

He sighed. It had to be his hard luck to encounter the stranger! What a job it would be to get the man on his horse, and a dirty trick to make old Pete carry double! The stranger must weigh a hundred and fifty pounds. It was even a tougher job than he had anticipated to persuade the pinto to remain quiet until he had the unknown astride of him, and he was perspiring despite the cold.

Eventually he got the injured man in the saddle, and himself got up behind the saddle to hold the victim upright. Then he gave the horse its head, and the animal moved forward slowly under the double burden.

DAWN was breaking when Billy broke into the bunk house at Diamond Dot and yanked the blankets from the recumbent form of Luke Lister, his crony. When Luke uttered a yowl of protest he said sharply: "Snap out of it. I've got a pilgrim outside on my horse, and he's pretty far gone. Help me bring him in."

Luke, a fair-haired, hulking youth in great need of a shave, thrust legs into a pair of overalls, slipped on his boots, and in half a minute joined Billy in the yard.

The stranger was muttering and protesting incoherently.

"Been like that for an hour," Billy stated. "He's got a crack on the head that knocked him loco. We'll have to fix him up and get the boss to send somebody over to Bliss for a doctor pronto."

They unfastened the rope which had prevented the injured man from toppling out of the saddle, and toted him, still protesting, into the house, where they laid him on a vacant bunk. Luke touched a match to the kindlings in the cannon-ball stove, always lighted by the first one up in the morning, then he drew a kettle of water from the tap and set it onto the stove to heat.

Billy covered the victim with blankets and took another look at the back of his head, which was badly swollen, the while he related to Luke the story so far as he knew it.

"Only way I can figure it out," he stated, "is that he bounced out of the back seat of an automobile, or else was chucked out.

"A car passed me, going hell bent for election, 'bout half an hour before I found this pilgrim lying unconscious on the road. You can see he wasn't hiking away up here in them clothes with shoes like those."

"Now, couldn't he tell you anything?"

"He was like a dead man for an hour, and then he began to mutter the way he is now, but I couldn't make head or tail out of what he was saying. He's loco."

"Have you gone through him? He might have papers in his pocket that would tell who he is."

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"Time enough to do that now," said Billy, who proceeded to make a thorough search of his charge's pockets, despite grumbling and throaty noises from the stranger.

"Not a paper, not a red cent," was the verdict. "He was robbed and flung into the road; that's what happened. Probably was driving his car and stopped to give some hobo a lift. Whoever done it cracked him over the head, took his overcoat and his money, and out he went.

"I bet it was the car I passed, for it was too cold for him to lay there a long time and live."

"Well!" exclaimed Chuck Moran, the range boss who had come in while he was talking. "Wake up the boys and have somebody go for a doctor. This dogie looks in a bad way. I don't suppose you're up to going, Billy," he added.

"I'll go if I have to, but gosh all fish hooks, I'm tired, and these danged boots just tore my feet to pieces. They was never made to dance in."

"Yip, yip, yip," shrieked Luke, who took a fiendish joy in waking the sleeping men, now that he had been so unceremoniously aroused himself.

Grunts and profane protests answered him. From four bunks in the back room four sleepy, unshorn cowhands rolled, and two who slept out front lifted themselves and blinked stupidly around.

"Got a mighty sick hombre here," Chuck Moran shouted. "Who's for the doctor? It's snowing outside and a rotten morning. Who feels ambitious?"

A chorus of groans answered.

Chuck bent over the injured man and inspected his head sagaciously. "Not such a bad crack," he opined. "Bet it's exposure and cold that hit him the worst, but we have to get the sawbones here as soon as possible."

"I'll go over to Bliss," volunteered Luke so readily that there was a general laugh.

Luke had a girl in that town. She spilled coffee in the lunch room.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A LOST MEMORY.

PHIL DECKERT opened his eyes lazily. Sun was pouring into his chamber, a low, raftered room; rather a pretty room, papered in pink and yellow, containing a dressing table of mahogany, one of those low tables with a very large round mirror above it, pink and yellow chintz-covered chairs. His hands lay outside a flowered coverlet, and he lifted one and regarded it stupidly. It was pale and thin, and the blue veins were very prominent.

He felt strangely and unaccountably weak, and he had no idea in the world where he might be. The windows were small, set with many little squares of glass, and he caught a glimpse of a tree outside, its limbs glittering with an icy coating.

There was snow on the sill outside both windows. There were pictures on the wall; a colored lithograph of the Sistine Madonna in a thin gold frame, a copy of "The Stag at Bay." Good Lord, where was he?

He heard a dog barking outside and the rattle of dishes from below. He tried to lift himself up on his elbow, but fell back exhausted and unsuccessful. Sick. Weak as a cat. What did it mean? He closed his eyes and tried to think of an explanation. The last thing he remembered, what was it? Yes. He was sitting in his room in the Parker Hotel in Laramie, his watch on the bed in front of him, waiting until it should be late enough to break into the room of Oke Jennings, who had his suitcase containing a hundred thousand dollars.

That was all. No, he seemed to have some recollection of riding in a motor car over very rough roads, but it was curiously hazy, that. What was he

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doing in a motor car? What had happened? Things were growing dim now, and he couldn't think any more. He slept.

The next time he opened his eyes he stared straight into a pair of exquisite brown eyes which were not six inches distant. He saw a small, very sweet face, an anxious face until a sudden, pretty smile lighted it.

"Hello," said a soft, girlish voice. "How do you feel?"

He had to return the smile. He was contented to lay there and smile foolishly at the pretty creature, whoever she might be.

The girl drew away and stood primly beside the bed. It was the same room—the same bed he remembered from that other time, but the girl had not been there then.

"Have I been ill?" he asked in a low tone.

"I'll rise to remark that you have," she said. "You were the sickest person who ever was sick in this country, but I expect you are going to get better right away."

She smiled so encouragingly that he felt better immediately.

"I wonder—have you been taking care of me?"

She nodded. "We all took turns, but I reckon I nursed you the most."

"That was very kind of you." He regarded her with complete approval. She was a very winsome sort of girl, small but sturdy, and her black hair was cut short so two tiny ears were visible. He saw that there was a layer of freckles across her nose and under her eyes, like stars on the Milky Way. She wore a blue and red dimity. His mother had worn that sort of dress, but cut differently. A small lace apron was knotted coquettishly around her waist.

"Where am I, if you please?"

"Why, at the Diamond Dot."

"What is that, and where is it?"

"It's a ranch, of course. My father's. I'm Nellie Blake."

"A ranch. That's funny. Near Laramie?"

"It's sixty miles away, and bad going."

"How did I get here? What happened to me?"

She sat on the edge of the bed and clasped her hands excitedly. "That's what we want you to tell us. Don't you know?"

He frowned. "I don't know. The last I remember I was in a room in a hotel. Have I been sick a few days?"

"Brother, you've been out of your head or unconscious a month," she said. "You were some sick man."

"A month!"

He looked so startled that she was frightened.

"Perhaps you'd better not talk now," she said. "I'll go."

"No, don't go."

"Then don't talk to me. I'll sit over here by the window."

She crossed the room resolutely, pulled up a chair by the window, and looked out.

A MONTH! Good heavens, a whole month, he was thinking, and away in the back country sixty miles from Laramie! How had he arrived here? A month gone! Some of his notes were due in three weeks now.

"Please answer one question, and I won't talk any more."

She turned with an engaging air of authority. "Very well. One question, and no more."

"How do I happen to be in your house?"

"One of our ranch hands found you laying unconscious on the road some ten or fifteen miles from here, and he put you on his horse and fetched you. Now please be quiet."

He shut his eyes. He could think better if he did not look at her. So he had been found lying in the road unconscious many miles from Laramie!

Oke Jennings! Jennings was the

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thief. Seeing Phil in the hotel lobby, he had understood immediately that the newspaper man was on his trail. He had already inspected the suitcase and knew its value, so while Phil waited for the zero hour to pay a visit to his room Jennings had forestalled him. Jennings had got into his room, found him asleep. Phil remembered that he had been fighting off drowsiness. Jennings had drugged him, got him out of the hotel, carried him into the wilderness, and thrown him out to freeze or starve to death in an almost uninhabited country.

A month had gone by, time enough for Jennings to get to Europe or Japan, to hide the money where it never would be discovered. Of course he had been robbed of what his pockets contained.

He groaned, and the little girl was again bending over him.

"Are you suffering? Are you in pain?" she demanded anxiously.

He could not resist her smile. "No," he sighed. "I was thinking of what happened. Was I—er—did I have any money or—er—papers when your man found me?"

"You were stripped clean as a whistle. We don't even know your name."

He grasped at that. "Didn't I mention it? I must have been delirious."

"You talked mostly gibberish. What is your name?"

"I'm trying to remember. Things aren't clear."

"And don't you know who you were with that night? How you came to be lying in the road?"

"No, I can't remember."

She patted his shoulder softly. "It will all come back. Don't worry your poor head now. I'm going downstairs to see about dinner. You try to sleep."

"All right," he agreed.

Some of the sunlight seemed to go out of the room as she departed. There was another girl—oh, yes, Miss Dolliver, the cause of all the trouble—the unconscious cause, of course. She was very beautiful, a gorgeous, sophisticated creature. But her departure did not suggest the departure of the sun as did this cheerful child's.

Girls! In the depths of an abyss of trouble and he was thinking about girls.

Here he lay, Phil Deckert, veteran reporter, shrewd, resourceful, experienced, thirty-seven years of age and as arrant a dupe as any countryman who ever bit on a confidence game in New York.

How crafty and ingenious he had been when he was pitting his wits against financiers and persuading them to give him good money for worthless pieces of paper called notes! How he had patted himself on the back and called himself a clever fellow! How neatly he had collected his loot and packed it in a bag and got out of New York without the knowledge of his creditors! How he had debated with himself regarding the use to which he had put it! He had debated whether he should cross the Rubicon and gamble with other people's money, a situation which seemed forced upon him because he had not wit enough to invest it safely and profitably.

Well, thanks to Oke Jennings, he could still look himself in the face as an honest man, if a thief who hasn't got around to stealing may be considered honest. Jennings had X-ray eyes which penetrated through the leather to the treasure in the bag. Jennings had the cunning which enabled him to take advantage of Phil's folly in leaving his possessions unguarded and Jennings had bluffed him to a standstill when he came unexpectedly face to face with the man he had despoiled in the Laramie hotel lobby.

And Jennings had resourcefulness. He had come upon the poor idiot who had fallen asleep while contemplating breaking into Room 33, had carried him off like a sweet little lamb, ran him out into the country and tumbled him out of an automobile like a piece of waste

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paper or a cigarette box that was empty!

In the old days Jennings would have murdered him out of hand, but they have law in the West now and murder wasn't necessary. If he froze to death or fractured his skull on the frozen ground, Jennings would be just as well served; and if he survived, Jennings had a clean start; probably a few hours would suffice him and he had had a month.

ERASE the sum of one hundred thousand dollars! Now, what was his situation? If he had remained in New York and lost the money speculating in stocks his creditors, he thought, had no legal redress save to put him into bankruptcy. The poor debtor's oath would wipe the slate clean and nothing would be ruined save his reputation, unless they found some way to punish him of which he was not aware.

But by leaving town with the money, he knew he had made himself liable. Under the Federal bankruptcy act, concealing assets and taking to flight is punishable with a prison term; two years, he thought. Of course he had expected to return to New York with the borrowed capital and his profits before the notes were due.

Should he return now with a tale of robbery which he could not prove? He knew his creditors; they would see that he got a prison sentence. They might even have moved already for a petition in bankruptcy since five weeks had elapsed without a word from him to assuage their anxiety. Phil knew far too much about prisons to wish to inhabit one.

Here he lay in this hospitable ranch, unknown, penniless and ill. He had disappeared from the train and his disappearance must have been wired back weeks ago by his newspaper friends. This would be interpreted as the act of a fugitive.

Officers might be searching for him even now with a Federal warrant and he might be in the toils at this minute save for the good fortune which had prevented him from babbling his name in his delirium.

These people were kind, the young girl was lovely, but what would they do with him when he was well enough to travel? They would expect him to wire friends for funds and go on his way; and there was nobody to whom he dared appeal for funds.

To convalesce, a patient should be mentally as well as physically on the mend. Poor Phil was mentally a wreck. He had told the girl nurse that he did not remember his name; something had warned him even then to conceal it. They knew that he had suffered a severe blow on the head and they might believe him if he professed to have lost his memory for the nonce. At least it would give him a little time to consider, to decide what he should do in his frightful dilemma.

He hated to lie to that sweet child because there was something so frank and honest in her eyes that they demanded confidence, but her parents might be less gentle, and justly suspicious.

If he had his health and strength he might contrive a way out of this situation, but he needed time. For a week he would pretend to have lost his memory, then give them a fictitious name and some sort of plausible tale to account for his predicament. Why the deuce hadn't Jennings murdered him while he was about it? The life he saw ahead of him was not so enticing that he would not have been glad to dispense with it.

He still slept most of the time, but he was growing stronger, eating with some approach to his old-time appetite and dreading the rapidly approaching hour when he must thank these people for their kindness and taking his departure. Where?

**TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.**

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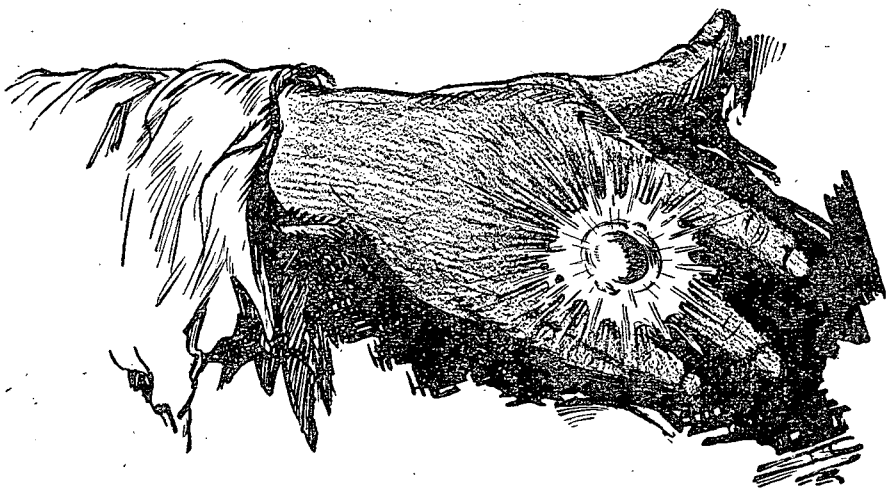

*Instantly it burst into the ruby fire that had astounded us once before*

# Marjola's Ring

***Three strangers came one by one to the camp of the explorers in the Gobi desert of China—and one was a murderer***

***By BERTRAND L. SHURTLEFF***

THERE was a gasp of indrawn breath somewhere in the Gobi desert's darkness. Then followed a shuffle of dragging feet across the sand. I sat up quickly, wondering if this was some new hint of treachery on the part of my guide.

Something moved against the stars, a vague shape that seemed only a little more human than animal. I gripped my revolver and watched its approach.

"Sarakov," I called sharply across the dying fire, "some one is coming."

A laugh came from his felt blanket, the reckless outburst of the Cossack. He knew that I did not trust him, yet he did not seem to resent my suspicions.

"It is no treachery of mine, master," he called mockingly, "no band of Soviet looters that I have summoned to rob and murder you. Sleep on; I doubt not it is but a wild ass that seeks food, or some wandering pony that scents man and comes for water."

The thing had lurched to a stop at our words, swaying drunkenly. Now it fell forward upon the sand and lay still, as though in hiding.

"It is a man," I insisted. "He lies there at length, where he has thrown himself to be out of range with the stars. Go to him, but be careful."

Still laughing at my fears, Sarakov went. I heard him grunt in surprise and his laughter ceased, as he came to the huddled shape. Quickly he bent and dragged it toward the fire.

"Truly, it is a man," he admitted, bending over the unconscious figure and brushing aside the rags and matted hair. "The third within the day—where no man should be."

"The gathering of the jackals," I grunted, making sure that my automatic was ready if he gave any sign of



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treachery. "They scent the kill from afar."

Sarakov laughed again and turned to kick the dull embers into flame. I stared down at the thing that lay there in pallid exhaustion under the filth and beard. The creature was plainly human, almost unmistakably European.

As I fell to wondering what had brought this man to such a plight, I dropped back and watched my guide go about the task of administering aid. Still suspicious, I kept my hand near my pistol, as I tried to explain away the coincidence of this third arrival out of the wastes.

Friends had cautioned me against this wild Cossack with the doubtful past when I chose Sarakov as my guide back in Kan-Chau. Something within me revolted at Mongol and Chinese alike and I had chosen his European face in preference to the slant eyes and the high cheek-bones of the natives. Inscrutable he was, with his eyes that were so black they hinted of Mongolian ancestry, and daring he had been, if one could believe half the stories they told of his past in the places where men gathered in Kan-Chau, but I had been given no occasion to doubt his faithfulness until this day when the strange men began coming to our temporary camp.

Marjola, the Syrian, came first, sitting his mangy camel and leering down at us as we toiled to extricate the bones of some prehistoric mammal that had wandered these expanses before lush vegetation had given way to the bare sand of the present.

"Aho," he had called. "Eenglais?"

Sarakov straightened from watching me apply the preparation that we used to preserve the specimens we were gathering for a distant museum. His dull black eyes gleamed with a luster that I could not fathom.

Marjola had descended to explain his chance arrival. Coming along the ancient caravan routes that had carried the treasures of the East to Europe for many centuries, he had lost his way and wandered into the wastes of the Gobi. Seeing our tents from afar, he had come to investigate. He was merely a trader, he assured us, although there was conscienceless evil in his face, if ever I saw it in human countenance.

Sarakov had dismissed his coming with a shrug, but not so the carriers. The coolies drew aside at his coming and shrill voices from the babble seemed to be condemning him as an undesirable. When I mentioned the possibility that he would try to rob us of our modern weapons, Sarakov only laughed and invited him to break fast with us.

KAMAL came next, a mere slip of a boy riding a shaggy pony that was almost ready to drop with weariness. He spat with disdain upon examining Marjola's camel and pointed to significant scars along its neck, one of them a fresh wound that still oozed a little blood.

When I scowled my lack of understanding he made the well-known movement with his thumb at open mouth that indicated drinking and tapped his own lips while he nodded slightly at Marjola, who was sitting some distance away at the fire.

Instantly I understood the dried blood about the trader's mouth. Following the custom that travelers insisted was in vogue in Turkestan, Marjola had drawn sustenance from his poor beast when far from water. My stomach rebelled at the thought, and my dislike for this wanderer who called himself a Syrian increased to the point of wishing him off into the solitudes again.

If there had been prearrangement about this meeting, Kamal and Marjola carried off the acting splendidly. No one could have guessed from the malevolent glances they shot each other that they were companion assassins meeting to murder me and divide my loot. I had finally lain down with

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the conviction that their coming was merely one of those inexplicable happenings that are always popping up in the affairs of man.

Then this third one had arrived out of the darkness, pretending to be completely exhausted.

Marjola lifted from his rugs and stared across the fire at Sarakov. Then he rolled to his feet and waddled heavily to the Cossack.

"My ring," he said, "the true bloodstone, it will do."

He lifted his hand and placed the big stone of the ring he wore against the fainting man's head. For a moment he held it there, while Kamal snorted his skepticism from across the fire.

Slowly the exhausted man opened his eyes. They were blue, and I read stark terror in them as they gazed about at us.

He burst into a medley of tongues to which Sarakov listened attentively.

"It is some wanderer who has fled from the Soviet," the Cossack explained. "I fear loneliness, thirst, and starvation have turned his mind."

Marjola was watching him narrowly, his eyes running over the ragged clothing and lingering on the features that were so plainly European.

"It is well that he sleeps," he said, breathing upon the ring. "This stone of mine brings sleep, too, when it is invoked with words from the Koran."

He muttered something under his breath and stroked the man's eyes. They struggled open after each passage of the jewel across them, but each time they seemed to grow heavier. In less than a minute the man dropped off into a deep sleep, breathing heavily.

"It is a real bloodstone," sighed Marjola, holding his ring up for inspection. "There is no such stone in your country, Eenglais."

I did not bother to explain to him that I was from America. Like all others in this great tract, except the few wandering Russians who sought voluntary exile here to escape the Soviet, he knew nothing of our huge hemisphere and classed all who spoke the tongue as English.

"This stone," Marjola laughed, showing his bloodstained lips in a grin that was hideous, "tells many things."

He seemed to be dreaming as he stared across the embers at the snoring man he had just consigned to slumber. I thought that I saw avarice gleam in his eyes as they took in that bundle of rags, yet who can read the inscrutable eyes of the Asiatic?

"It tells something that no eye can tell," he went on, looking up at me quickly as though he had read my thoughts. "It can tell the hand of him who has shed the blood of a fellow man."

We laughed. Asia is rife with fantastic tales of this sort, but Kamal and Sarakov were traveled and scorned the miracle stories of the ignorant.

"I will show," muttered Marjola, his eyes darkening. "Put forth thy hand."

Obediently I stretched forth my fingers. He slipped the huge ring over one of them and turned it so that the flat of the huge stone was toward the fire. I caught sight of tiny flecks of red in the brownish mass, but he shook his head and passed on to Kamal.

Again the stone seemed to be silent, for Marjola let us see that it was still merely flecked with red.

"You are next," he said.

Sarakov shrugged and laughed, throwing away the half-smoked cigarette, in spite of the fact that our supply was low. His long white fingers gleamed in the fire light as the ring still gave forth only its tiny flecks of light.

"It is well," grunted Marjola. "None of you bears the mark of murderer. Shall I try this dog who comes from the land of killings?"

"Try any one you like," I scoffed. "How can a ring tell the hand of a murderer from that of a killer of sheep?"

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He stepped quickly across the fire and picked up the limp hand of the sleeper. In an instant the ring was on one of the fingers and we stared at it in amazement. Instead of remaining as before it now glowed like a great ruby that has caught the light of the sun to cast it back in bloody intensity.

"Yah, he has killed," hissed Marjola, quickly withdrawing his ring and returning to his rugs.

He blew upon the stone gently and the light died within it. I watched him returning it to his own finger and wondered that it did not glow again, for he had as evil a face as I had seen in all Asia.

"Let us sleep," said Sarakov, rolling up in his felt covering again. "On the morrow there are many bones to uncover."

HOW I slept with those three near to me I do not know. During the night I saw, or dreamed I saw, a figure rise from Kamal's place beside me, but when I reached out my hand to touch him, he was still there. Then the weariness of our work overcame me and I must have slept again.

"Master," called Sarakov, shaking me awake in the cold gray of morning, "come. Murder has been done here in the night."

I stared at him in shocked disbelief until he motioned across the fire. Then I saw the drying pool that marked where the last arrival's life stream had seeped into the sand during the night.

The knife still stuck in the gaunt ribs, the weirdly designed blade that Kamal had worn at his waist when he came to our camp at supper hour, asking for food and water. We stared at it in horror, wondering why the boy should wish to kill this penniless stranger.

"He must be mad," I whispered. "Straying alone in these wastes has upset his mind. He might kill us all in the same way."

Sarakov shrugged and stared at the two figures in the rugs and worn felt. Something that I did not understand was passing through his mind, for he smiled as he looked at them.

Our earlier visitors stared at the murdered man upon awakening. Kamal looked at the hilt of the knife and hastily reached for his own belt, while Marjola sneered openly.

"Why has thou done this, spawn of trouble?" he asked harshly.

Kamal looked at him with dawning terror in his eyes.

"It is no deed of mine," he declared, glaring around at us.

"More trouble for us, Sarakov," I groaned. I could not regret very deeply that the poor moribund wretch before us had been taken from his misery.

My guide shrugged. Trouble enough confronted us without having murder on our hands. Coming in with passports from the Northern army, we had hoped to gather such specimens as we could find and return without trouble. Our last message from Kan-Chau had come by runner to inform us that the Southern Army was rapidly approaching and our only line of egress from the country would be in their hands long before we could hope to complete our work and return.

The officials of the Southern army would have granted us passports as readily as did those of the Northern, but the safe-conducts issued by the enemy would be liabilities rather than assets. We had even heard that all who held them were persecuted as spies; our only hope would be to buy our way through the Southern army's lines with large bribes.

Money might be forthcoming for our own safe return, in time, but I hesitated to ask the museum to go into more expense on our account, since we had already met unexpected reversals that had practically consumed the generous allowance set aside for the trip. Moreover our captors might grow impatient and behead us if a delay ensued.

"Yet the murderer must be caught and punished," said Sarakov.

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"Let him be his own executioner," leered Marjola, drinking his coffee noisily. "Let him go, when proved guilty, into the Gobi without food, water, or beast of burden. That will be punishment enough."

"It is well," said Sarakov, his eyes still inscrutable as he gazed into the fire. "Then no one will be burdened with conducting him to the authorities."

"Then go, Kamal," cackled Marjola harshly, nudging the boy with his elbow. "Was it not thy knife?"

Kamal's eyes glinted angrily under the accusation. His fingers went to his belt again, but did not find the knife, which had been withdrawn from the murdered man's throat and placed beside the dried pool.

"Dog, I go not until proved guilty," he snarled. "Whose tracks lead to the dead?"

"The night wind has erased them," said Sarakov, still looking into the fire.

"Thou hast the bearing of a Solomon," said Marjola oilily, rubbing his dirty hands and leaning toward the guide. "Sit in judgment at a trial, that we might convict the murderer."

I expected the Cossack to refuse, but he only nodded. I was glad to be rid of the business.

"It is well, Marjola," he said. "Do you wish to be the one who accuses?"

"Aye, aye, for there was his knife stuck in his throat."

Sarakov stood up, smiling that cold little smile of his.

"And will you defend the accused?" he asked, bowing low before me.

"I will defend him," I said slowly, "but there is no defense."

"Then must the court decide upon such evidence as chance shall present, disallowing any plea, even that of this wanderer who calls himself Marjola."

SARAKOV advanced to the packing case that we had prepared for the largest specimen we had excavated, and seated himself with a grand flourish of his cape. I thought of those stories of his former greatness and dismissed my own suspicions. Here was no petty thief, but a man who laughed at life with the unconcern of the philosophic, having known poverty and riches and found them both wanting.

"The case is opened," he said solemnly. "Let us consider the evidence and draw such conclusions as we might, remembering that the life of a man depends upon our decision."

Marjola looked at Kamal with that sneer his face had worn all morning. The boy glowered back at him, his dirty hands clenched until the black-rimmed nails bit into the palm. Whether he had committed the murder or not, I could not guess from his face; but I knew that he would have killed the trader on the spot if he could have found a suitable weapon.

"Can any one suggest a motive?" asked the judge, looking at us with no trace of anything but a desire for justice in his countenance. "Can any one inform the court why this man was done to death, or suggest what might have been the cause, if no proof is forthcoming?"

Marjola was silent and I saw that he was plainly puzzled.

"Then let us pass on. I know not how to conduct a court as one should, but I do my best. This knife was found within the wound. Is it your knife, Kamal, as the trader insists?"

The boy gulped and nodded. I thought that I saw a glint of sympathy in the eyes of my carefree Cossack, as he looked at the drooping shoulders of the youth.

"It was this knife that made the wound, but who knows the hand that held the knife? When a man sleeps, his knife might be stolen and the guilt thus placed upon him. Is not that possible, Marjola?"

"Possible," snarled the trader, "but for what purpose? No one here bears enmity to this youth."

There was a pause while Sarakov appeared to be in deep thought. I mar-

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veled at his coolness and his willingness to assume this unpleasant duty.

"This case seems to be beyond solution," he murmured, after a long wait. "I do not find sufficient evidence to convict this boy. I fear we must call in the authorities after all. We must all stand accused until freed by law."

Marjola's face was inscrutable, but he fingered the ring.

"This bloodstone of mine," he purred. "It never fails to reveal the guilt. Will the court ask it to decide?"

Sarakov smiled broadly and leaned forward upon his palm. I saw that his other hand, which supported his elbow, was near to the handle of his automatic.

"Let us know what the ring says," he added. "Try it upon all."

Marjola placed it upon the finger of the Cossack, who held out his hand imperiously for the first test. Then he came to me and I was repulsed by that dried blood upon his lips, which he had not bothered to wash off during his twenty-hour stay with us. I drew back, but allowed him to put the ring on my finger.

He passed on swiftly to Kamal who stared at him with frightened eyes.

I pitied the lad. A wanderer since his first recollections, orphaned perhaps by bandits who robbed his murdered parents, his nationality lost in a forgotten past, he was a pathetic sight as he crouched there, frightened at the merciless manner in which Marjola seemed to be hounding him to punishment.

"Put forth your hand, Kamal, for the ring," said Sarakov, and his voice was almost kindly. "It is the command of the court."

The trembling fingers were stretched forth and the heavy band of gold put in place about one of them. Instantly it glowed with that ruby fire that had astounded and awed us the previous evening. The ring marked him now as a murderer, after having declared him innocent a few hours before the discovery of the body.

"Look," cackled Marjola, "the ring has told. It has never failed in all the years that I have worn it, nor did it fail my father, nor my grandfather."

"Let me see," said Sarakov coldly.

Trembling, the boy advanced toward the packing case. His eyes were no longer silent and dull. They begged with all the entreaty of a dog that asks his master to rescind some harsh command.

Sarakov picked up his limp wrist and stared at the stone, turning it and examining it carefully. Then he smiled and drew the ring from the lad's hand.

The stone continued to glow, although Sarakov blew upon it several times during his scrutiny.

"It glows until the proper words are whispered upon it," smiled Marjola ingratiatingly, reaching for the trinket.

Sarakov held up his hand in denial and still toyed with the ring. I alone saw that his other fingers sought the butt of the pistol.

"SEE, Marjola," he said smoothly at last, "it glows no longer, although I have not spoken your magic words. Does it perform for me what it refuses to do for all others?"

I saw the trader tense and drop his hand to his belt, but the judge spoke on in the same tone.

"It is not well to reach for thy weapon, dog of a murderer. Confess thy sin and go forth for thy punishment, even as thou hast decreed."

"I—I?" stammered Marjola, staring at the Cossack.

"Yes, dog, for thou hast killed this man and attempted to place the blame upon this boy. See, I have found the spring within thy accursed ring that turns on the light. I know not what it is within your trinket, but it is the hand of Marjola which presses upon this pin to change the color. Thou hast attempted this deceit to cover thine own tracks, dog of an outlander."

"*Aie*, but I am innocent," wailed

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Marjola. "I have killed nobody. I am but a trader who journeys homeward with the rich gems that he has won by barter in many lands."

"You lie between the teeth," said the Cossack coldly. "The gems are stolen from this wretch at our fire. He carried them sewed within the hem of his poor garments."

He had picked up his whip which lay beside him on the box. With that adeptness that only the Cossack and the Australian know he sent the long lash hissing out to the body of the murdered man. Softly the rawhide flicked back the torn, bedraggled robe. The hem truly had been ripped and left unsewed, in the haste of him who sought its contents.

"Not I, not I," insisted the trader, falling to his knees and extending his hands. "The gems that I bear are those that I have taken in trade. Jewels torn from the mountains by the Khan in the centuries past and kept by his people to exchange for the things I brought hence on my camels."

Sarakov laughed, a sneering smile that lifted the corner of his lips and bared the even white teeth. The Syrian went on desperately:

"This garment, the thread has but rotted away. I swear I have not killed him."

I thought of the figure that had moved by Kamal's blankets, when I aroused and touched the lad. I was about to speak when Sarakov held up his hand imperiously for silence.

"These things you may explain to the proper authorities, Marjola, if you do not care to abide by this court. The blade of the executioner of China is sharp and the death painless. One swish and the head is severed. Is it not so?"

"But why, why do you insist that I have killed this man?"

"Thy ring was cleverly produced before we slept, Marjola. It was the master stroke of one skilled in crime, this attempt to prepare us for the proof of the trial. It took away all sympathy for the dead man, as it branded him as a killer when at the same time it revealed the virtue that it is supposed to possess. Then it was to have crushed this lad with its damning evidence, had I not chanced upon the tiny knob that changes something within."

Marjola had slumped down upon the sands, his face filled with despair.

"Thy haste was too great in the darkness, robber and thief. One of the stones slipped through thy fingers and lodged in the sand. I found it glinting in the sunlight, as I came upon the corpse. That was thy motive, murderer, the theft of the jewels that he bore."

Marjola crept forward on his stomach. His face was wreathed in friendly smiles.

"Thou hast spoken with the wisdom of Solomon, Sarakov, greatest of Cossack leaders. Thou art truly a wise man. Thou art too wise, O judge, to condemn me to the desert without food, weapon, water, or camel. You will share with me these precious stones that this dog has stolen from some rich count during the rebellion and hidden from his countrymen. There is enough for all. They are rich enough for the Khans of old."

Sarakov extended his empty hand, still holding his pistol with the other one.

"Produce them," he commanded.

For an instant Marjola hesitated. Then he drew forth a bag and poured the glittering mass upon the box, a full pint of rubies such as few men have ever seen, great orbs of fire that glinted blood red in the rays of the sun. "That man was a thief himself—a Soviet dog," he whined. "He looted these from some lost tomb."

The Cossack drew another from his breast and laid it beside the collection. Then he shrugged and looked at Marjola.

"It is time for you to be gone," he said coldly. "Lay thy weapons here and depart."

The trader leaped like a snarling cat.

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His hand struck up the pistol, before Sarakov could fire, and his knife flashed.

UNABLE to fire without risking injury to the Cossack, I stared in horrified amazement, as they squirmed and twisted beside the box and its precious burden.

Kamal sprang in to twine his fingers about the neck of the man who had sought to fasten the crime upon him, but a backward kick from the trader sent him sprawling. The two were at close grips now, breathing in quick grunts as they tried to free their wrists and bring their weapons into play.

"Keep Kamal away," called Sarakov. "My wrist might weaken and he might be hurt by the dog's knife."

I drew the boy to safety while I waited with poised pistol to send a bullet into the murderer at the first opportunity. I trembled for the slighter Cossack, seeing the fire of desperation burning in the trader's eyes.

It seemed hours that they struggled, with no advantage on either side.

They struck against the packing case and it tipped over, spilling the rubies in a fiery little rivulet into the waste. They labored and strained, heaved and twisted, until it seemed that the slighter man must break under the strain that the great trader put upon him.

Suddenly Sarakov yelped with the shrill call of the Japanese wrestler who foretells the defeat of his rival. Marjola went white at the sound, then tried to wrench away.

Too late, he realized that he was in the grasp of an expert. His hand went backward, caught in the viselike grip of his master. Bones snapped. The knife dropped to the sand.

"The servant of my father taught me well," said the Cossack with that cold smile. "You will go now, robber and murderer. See that you come not back."

Marjola managed to get to his feet. He staggered a few steps into the ridged desert, holding his wounded arm in his good hand.

"Have mercy," he begged, looking back. Sarakov laughed and waved him on. He shuffled over a steep incline and was gone.

Instantly the authority of Sarakov's temporary position fell from him. He no longer resembled a ruler dictating law to ignorant peasants, but slipped into the obedient manner that he had adopted toward me from the first. But I understood now that scornful little look that I had tried to fathom during the long weeks we had been together.

"You knew," I asked, "that this man was tricking us with this ring, even before we lay down to sleep?"

Sarakov nodded, his chin upon his breast. "For what reason, I knew not."

"And how did you know? Do not the men of Russia accept such miracles as this ring that was to have told murderers?"

Sarakov laughed, but there was no humor in the cackle. It was the laugh of one who has sinned, rather than the joyous outburst of the carefree Cossack.

"I knew," he said quietly, "when the dog placed it upon my hand—and it did not glow."

I looked at his bowed shoulders and could not speak. Who was I to probe into the past of this man who had roamed the great Siberian wilds. I had found him loyal, wise, kindly. I had no desire to pry into his past. I spoke:

"There are many jewels here. Some for you—we might give one to this poor lad who so nearly lost his life over them. But above all, here is a bribe fit for even the generals of the Southern army," I mused, poking at the gems in the sand with the toe of my boot. "Our passports will be viséd without question, Sarakov."

"Without question," he nodded, scornfully unmindful of the gems.

THE END.

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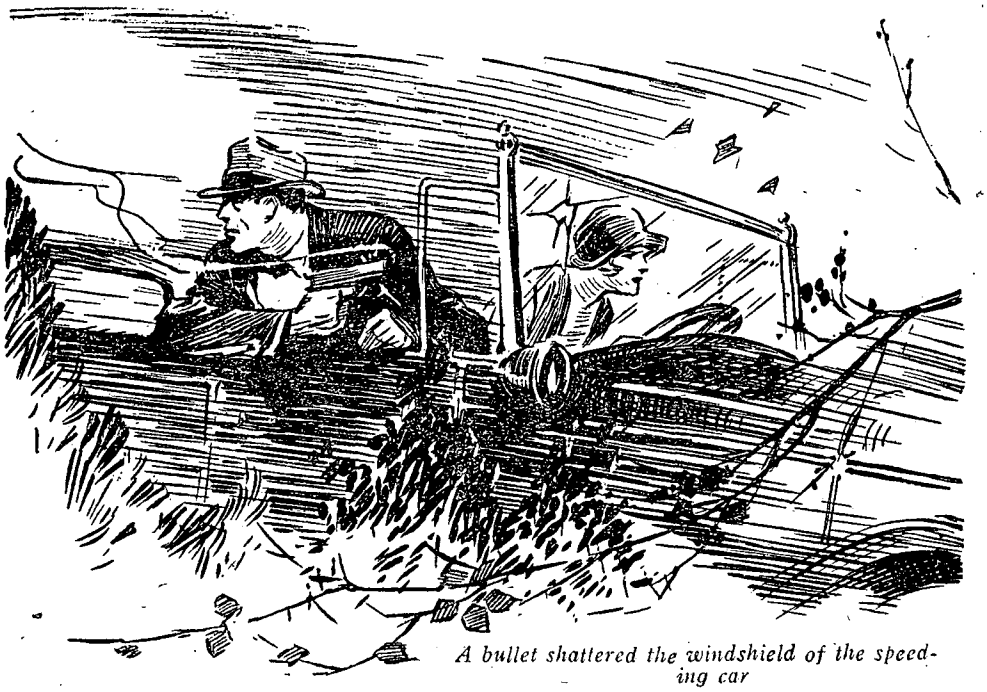

*A bullet shattered the windshield of the speeding car*

# The Big Shot

***Enid Howard needs all her wit in a desperate struggle to avert catastrophe from her lover and his deadly foe, the underworld ruler whom she recognizes as her brother***


**By FRANK L. PACKARD**

***Author of "The Miracle Man," "The Locked Book," etc.***


## LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ENID HOWARD, who is living on the East Side with a former housekeeper of her family, to gather local color for a book she is writing, has met Phil Martin, a reporter on the *Herald-Star*. In the Gondola Restaurant, on Third Avenue, where they become acquainted, he tells her that from Shive Frank, a gangster he has befriended, he has learned something about the "Big Shot," the uncrowned ruler of the underworld. Shive Frank is to give him the photograph of the Big Shot, taken a few years before in a group picture at Coney Island.

On her way home Shive Frank runs up beside her, and asks her to give Phil Martin the picture, because he is being followed and doesn't dare to. Indignantly she refuses, but he drops it on the sidewalk and runs, leaving her no choice but to pick it up. A block away an automobile draws up alongside Shive Frank and riddles him with bullets.

Terrified, she returns home and looks at the photograph. She is certain it is her brother Roy, who had been reported missing in the World War. Locking the snapshot in her trunk, she leaves the house, though it


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is after midnight, and prowls around the back of Izzy Myers's junk shop, which is, according to Phil Martin's information, one of the gang's hang-outs. There she overhears Myers tell two of his men where to meet the Big Shot, to raid some loot that Twisty Morgan, a rival mob leader, has just taken in. Enid hurries away, hoping to be first at the rendezvous. She hides, sees the two men and the Big Shot—who she is certain is her brother—enter a house. But she sees a policeman running to telephone, so she follows the men into the house to warn her brother of his danger. They escape, taking her along; and a bullet gouges her scalp.

She comes to, next day, in the Big Shot's luxurious home. The morning papers featured the unidentified "girl bandit," the lookout who had warned the gangsters—herself!

The Big Shot denies he is her brother Roy. He says he is Norman —"Norry"—Kane, of Chicago; and although he says he was knocked out during the war and woke up in a prison camp with his memory utterly gone, yet he was taken on an American front; and when he returned to New York, Izzy Myers recognized him, brought his parents from Chicago, and they too identify him. So have other Chicago gangsters since. He had been a crook there before the war. It is absolutely a case of mistaken identity, he claims, and his "parents" back him up.

He knows that Phil Martin, the reporter, is on his trail, and doesn't know how much Shive Frank had told him; so he plans to remove Martin. Enid, torn between her love for her "brother" and her growing realization of how much she cares for Martin, slips away from the Big Shot's house that night and, disguised in the housekeeper's clothes, hurries to the house where, she heard Izzy Myers tell Norry's "mother," Mrs. Kane, Phil is tied up. She rescues him; Phil knocks out Batty Rose, his guard, and they escape from the house just as two of the gang arrive.

## CHAPTER XII.

### AGAINST THE WALL.

THE car! The car the two gangsters had parked at the curb! Enid, running, headed toward it with Phil keeping pace beside her. That window had probably not been opened for many months, and the two men must have heard the noise it made, it had creaked so. She and Phil had not alighted on the ground without making some noise as well.

She glanced over her shoulder. Yes, there they were, just emerging from the basement door. Now, leaping up to the pavement, they were in pursuit.

It was only a few yards from the house to the car. Would there be time to start the car? Or was it idling? It was a habit of such men as these to leave their engines running.

"Quick!" she panted. "Check them with a shot over their heads. I can drive. Give me time to start the car, if necessary."

"Right!" he flung back tersely, and half turned as he ran. The flame-tongue of his revolver cut through the semidarkness, and the roar of the report racketed up and down the street. It was the second's respite that she needed. She had reached the car now, and, as she flung herself at the wheel, a sidelong glance showed her that both men had instinctively hesitated and were holding back.

The engine *was* idling! She threw in the clutch, and as Phil Martin leaped in beside her, the car sprang away from the curb like a spurred horse.

Shots came then, execrations, savage oaths. The two men were furiously emptying their weapons. She crouched low over the wheel, her lips tight together in a straight line. Last night



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like this she had not escaped unscathed! A bullet shattered the windshield. But the car was speeding now, faster than she had ever driven in her life.

The shots were dying away in the distance. She swung around a corner, sped along the block, turned another corner, and still another. She was imbued with only one purpose now—to double and turn and throw any further pursuit off the track.

And then she felt her arm pressed significantly, and, slowing the car, she pulled up to the curb.

"Yes," she said breathlessly, as the car came to a stop, "I fancy we are quite safe now. What shall we do with the car—leave it here?"

Phil was staring at her with troubled, anxious eyes.

"Enid," he said hoarsely, "where did you get those clothes—that hat?"

Her hands gripped on the wheel—gripped and tightened there until her knuckles were like rows of white knobs under the tight-drawn skin. She had forgotten her hat, her clothes, her spectacles, her grime-streaked face and hands—to put it mildly, her bizarre appearance—in the danger and excitement of the escape. Back there in the house, of course, the darkness had protected her, and he had recognized her only by her voice.

What should she say? What was there to say? She had already staved off his questions several times after she had found him there in that room. She couldn't do that any more, with this strange masquerade of hers obviously making those questions more imperative than ever in his mind! She stared out through the splintered windshield. How curious it made the street and window lights look! She made no answer. No words would come.

He paid her an unintentional compliment.

"I would have passed you anywhere on the street without knowing you," he said. "What does it mean, Enid—this disguise, I suppose you call it, that you've put on? It had something to do, of course, with to-night, with being in that house, with finding me. Tell me!"

She tried to smile, but it was a miserable failure; and then, out of her agony of mind she answered almost hysterically:

"Oh, I can't—I can't! Not now!"

HE misunderstood her. He laid his hand gently over one of hers where it still gripped fiercely at the wheel.

"I'm a brute to prod you with questions after what you've just been through," he said contritely. "It's the reaction, of course. If you weren't the brick you are, you'd have gone completely to pieces instead of taking it as corkingly as you are doing."

He infused a sudden lightness into his voice. "Worse than big game in the Rockies, wasn't it? Never mind! You'll be all right in a few minutes—you can tell me about it then. Meanwhile, you asked me about the car. It's probably a stolen car, so the license number won't help any; but the police will want to look it over anyway. We'll drive it over to the police station and make a report about that house—get a detail down there on the run, you know, if the gun battle hasn't already been responsible for a riot call!"

The police! The word seemed to go through her like a galvanic shock. It meant disaster, utter and absolute. It meant exposure. How could she explain to the police? And then there was Roy to consider. She cried out sharply now:

"The police! How can I go to the police like this? What would they say when they had washed my face and taken my spectacles away? And even if I could satisfy them, think what it would mean! The notoriety, the sensationalism of it! And why should I go? Batty Rose and his gang would then



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know who I was. Why should I appear in the matter at all?"

"Don't!" he protested with a wry grimace. "I'm afraid I'm what you called Batty Rose—not very bright. I wasn't thinking of that phase of it; but I am sure I would have 'come to' before I had let you get that far into the limelight. As a matter of fact, I wasn't thinking of anything except that it was up to me to get into touch with the police and also with the 'desk'—my paper, you know—and my suggestion was just blurted out because under ordinary circumstances it was more or less the natural thing to do. I certainly don't want you to be known in the matter, and you certainly won't be if I can help it.

"There's another and even quicker way out of it. You wait for me here in the car while I run into the nearest store and telephone. I've got to give my paper whatever there is of a scoop in this, and naturally I've got to talk to the police—and tell them we have left the car here. That's the best thing to do with it. Afterward I'll get you home any way you like. How will that do?"

She did not answer for a moment. This was almost as bad, wasn't it? The police would go to the house and put some of their men in charge there—and Roy, some time during the night, was to go there. He would walk right into a trap.

No! What was the matter with her? She did not seem to be able to think clearly. The shooting would have aroused the neighborhood and brought the patrolman on post to the spot anyhow. The two gangsters would have made their escape, and Batty Rose would, or would not, have recovered his senses in time to do likewise. If Roy started for the house any time within the next half hour, there would still be enough excitement on the street to warn him away—and within half an hour at the most the Big Shot would certainly have been tipped off to what had happened by his own gangsters. The last thing Roy would therefore attempt to do would be to enter the "House To Let" to-night.

Relief came to her now in large measure, but there was still one other point that troubled her. When she had started out she had not anticipated any outcome such as this—a gunfight in public on the street.

"Yes; that's all right, but how are you going to keep me out of it in your newspaper account?" she asked. "What are you going to say to the police? There must be people who saw what happened, or enough of it anyway to know that a woman was there." She forced a challenging smile. "Is she to play the rôle of 'The Mysterious Woman'—in headlines?"

"You leave that to me," he said with quiet assurance. "She won't be Enid Howard, anyhow. I'll fix that, all to the merry! And now what about it? Will you wait here for me? I won't be more than four or five minutes, and obviously the police won't be here for the car before I'm back, since they won't know where it is until I've told them."

SHE shook her head.

"No," she said; "we'll abandon it together now. I'm afraid that splintered windshield might attract attention. That man who just went by stared at it—or perhaps it was at me—rather curiously."

"Come on then," he agreed.

"Where are we?" she asked, as she started to walk along beside him.

"Don't you know?" he returned in surprise. "You didn't seem to hesitate much in your handling of the car."

"That's just it, I didn't," she said. "I didn't care where I was going, so that I turned corners often enough."

"Well, it's Third Avenue," he told her. "And this store will do. It seems to have a telephone booth."

She caught his arm quickly. A taxicab was passing.

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"Please hail that taxi," she requested.

"Why—what for?" he ejaculated; but mechanically he obeyed her. "I've got to telephone first."

"Yes," she said, "and I'm not at all anxious to go into the store, or stand here in the street either, dressed like this. I'll wait for you in the taxi."

Phil Martin's expression became suddenly one of apprehension. "Look here," he said as the taxi halted at the curb and the driver reached out and swung the door open, "you—you're not going to—"

"Give you the slip?" She smiled a little wanly. "Yes," there was a tremor in her voice, "perhaps it would be better that way if I could, but I can't. You know where I live. I will wait for you."

He leaned toward her impulsively, taking both her hands, looking into her eyes.

"On your honor?" he demanded in a low voice.

"On my honor," she answered.

She was still standing at the curb as he left her and entered the store; and now she turned to the taxi driver. "We'll wait until that gentleman comes back," she said; and then, accompanied by a bank note, she gave the man the corner of her street and Second Avenue as the address at which he was to stop and let her out. "You understand?" she ended.

"Sure!" he grinned. "I'm wise!"

She got into the taxi and sat down. She wanted to cry. She would have cried if it were not for the driver sitting there on the other side of that glass partition. She dreaded this ride with the man she loved. Yes, she wanted to cry. It was not only that she could explain nothing, tell him nothing; it was to be a parting. And he? Yes, she was afraid—and strangely, and oh so unwisely glad—that he, too, cared. She was not blind. How could she be blind to that? He had shown it so many times to-night, in his words, in his voice, in his manner, in the touch of his hand.

Her head hurt her. Mechanically she raised her hand—only to draw it back. Of course! Her head was bandaged. She had forgotten about that. Was she really Enid Howard?

And presently, when Phil Martin emerged from the store, she could not see him very well, for, though her spectacles and the dark interior of the cab would hide it from him, she knew there was a mist before her eyes; but her voice, as he paused at the side of the cab with the obvious intention of giving directions to the driver, was steady, almost casual, as she forestalled him.

"I've told him where to go," she said.

"Oh, all right!" he said easily; then to the driver, as he stepped into the cab:

"Let 'er go, son!"

The taxi started forward.

"Well, I've got that fixed up!" he announced buoyantly. "And now tell us all about it, Enid. There is no place like a taxicab for confidences. That's why they all rattle—so's the drivers can't hear."

IT was inevitable. It had to come sooner or later—before she left the cab. But it was so hard to face. If she could only put it off again, even for a few more minutes. She wasn't very brave about it, but it was hard to be brave with a breaking heart. She found herself speaking in a voice so quiet and composed, but with just the right stress of eagerness, that it seemed somehow it could not be her own.

"No," she said, "I'd rather hear your story first. Tell me how they got you into that house."

"Why, don't you know?" he exclaimed.

"No."

"Then, how did you—"

"I am supposed to be listening to your story," she reminded him. "How did it happen?"

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He smiled a little ruefully.

"It was an old gag," he said. "The oldest there is. Matches! I told you that in the house. I'd just had a snack in Pete Lonezzi's spaghetti place with a police lieutenant friend of mine, who is just as keen on getting his hands on the Big Shot as I am—in fact, that's what we'd been talking about while we were there. When I left him I started across town along Sixty-Eighth Street. I don't know whether any one saw it or not. There weren't many people about. A man, coming up from behind, asked me pleasantly enough for a match. I handed him my box—and he handed me one over the head with a blackjack. I went groggy; but I was just conscious enough to realize that a car had slipped up to the edge of the sidewalk, and that I was being bundled into it. When I got my senses back, I was lying up there in that room, roped and gagged."

He paused for an instant, and laughed grimly.

"They thought I was still unconscious, and I let them think so. That's how I found out that the fellow who blackjacked me was called Batty—you supplied the surname. There were only two of them at this time, though how many were in the car and all that originally, I don't know. The other fellow answered to the name of Skinny. He coughed a lot. I didn't see either of them. They stood in the dark outside the room in the hall and yapped—but they yapped too much for their own good. I heard one or two things! I guess I came nearer meeting the Big Shot to-night than I have yet."

"Yes?" she said a little faintly.

"Oh, yes!" He was laughing grimly again. "That's what it was all about. In some way or other the Big Shot had got wind of what was going on between Shive Frank and me. One of the things I overheard Batty say was that the Big Shot was coming down there to have a little seance with me—and bump me off. Pleasant! Not exactly the way I'd figured I'd end up with the Big Shot! But never mind about that; I didn't end up that way, thanks to you—and I won't ever now. With the leads I've go to-night, that house, Skinny, Batty Rose, and other things they said, I'll have the Big Shot trapped in short order; and when I do— Say, do you know what happened to-day?"

Was it the jolting of the taxi? Her head seemed suddenly to be spinning around, a strange numbness to be settling upon her. She thought that she said, "No," but she was not sure.

"WELL, I'll tell you! Shive Frank's wife came to see me. There was a lot Shive Frank knew about the Big Shot that he had never told me—things that he'd been mixed up in himself in the old days when he had been close to this Hal Varney; things he didn't dare to tell for fear of getting into trouble himself. But he hated the Big Shot after the Big Shot had, as he claimed, double crossed him, and he evidently nursed that hatred with the idea that some day he would have his revenge—even if it wasn't until after he was dead. Perhaps he thought it would be safer then!

"What he did was to put down on paper a record of the major crimes in which he and the Big Shot had been engaged together. Some time ago his wife discovered what he was doing. She told me she was scared stiff.

"You probably wouldn't have heard anything about it up in Winnipeg, but a number of years ago there was a particularly brutal murder of a man named Jonvers, a bootlegging affair, over on Long Island, that filled the papers for weeks, and has been a mystery ever since. This was one of the things Shive had recorded in detail. He took part in the crime himself, and was equally guilty, but it was this same Hal Varney, the Big Shot, who actually committed the murder.

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"Shive's wife hadn't any qualms where crime was concerned, and she's known to the police herself; but, strange as it may seem for a woman of her character, she was not only on the level with her husband, but she loved him in honest fashion and with the whole soul of her. At least, she says so, and I believe her.

"As I said, she was badly frightened when she found out what Shive had done. She was afraid somebody else might find out, too—and that Shive would be 'hoist with his own petard.' She begged him to destroy the papers. He wouldn't listen to her. No one knew better than he that, with the life he led, he was skirting the brink of eternity most of the time. In fact, from what he said to me once or twice, I think he had a premonition that he'd go for a ride some day, in which case those memoirs of his were to be a legacy, to damn the Big Shot. Finally Shive and his wife compromised. Shive was to seal up the papers and put them into safe-keeping somewhere. This he did.

"He had an old crony named Schnaffner, a pawnbroker on the lower East Side. He got Schnaffner to put the packet in his safe, and, without telling his pawnbroker friend what the packet contained, got Schnaffner to promise that it wouldn't be opened while he, Shive, was alive. This was some time ago. Lately, after he found out that I was after the Big Shot, he changed these instructions. He told both his wife and Schnaffner that if anything happened to him the packet was to be delivered to me! You can see why, of course. He would have an executor, as it were, who, though for very different reasons, was as keen as himself on seeing the Big Shot put away.

"That's the story his wife told me this afternoon. She's glad now that Shive wrote those memoirs. I don't know who handed him the spot last night, though I believe it was the gang he squealed on, as I was telling you in the Gondola; but she thinks it was the Big Shot's crowd. She was like a tigress. We went down to Schnaffner's place together, but Schnaffner is away until the end of the week, and of course they wouldn't hand over the packet. But two or three days do not count. What counts is that when we've got him behind the bars we'll have the goods on him for jobs we didn't know about before, and for one of them at least, that Jonvers killing, that will send him to the chair. You understand what all this means, don't you?"

HE was talking about Roy. She fought frantically for self-control. He was talking about Roy—The chair! He had said that from what he had learned and heard to-night he would soon have the Big Shot trapped. For Roy's sake, she must find out exactly what he meant to do. For Roy's sake she must not show any sign of agitation—for she must trick and play a double game with this man—this man whom she loved.

"But you haven't got the Big Shot behind the bars yet," she observed judicially. "You've never seen him, and you don't even know what he looks like. You said you heard Batty Rose and a man called Skinny talking. Did they say where the Big Shot lived?"

He shook his head.

"Oh, no; nothing near as good as that!" he smiled. "What they said may not amount to anything, just enough to give a rather hazy clew to some of their games, that we may or may not be able to run down. It's the house and the two men themselves that are vital. The house can't answer questions, but its landlord or its owner can; and what with that, and running Batty Rose and Skinny to earth, it won't take long to dig the Big Shot out of his hole."

"But Skinny is a rather common sobriquet, isn't it?" she objected.

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"This Skinny coughs a lot!" he said significantly. "The police will comb the city for him. Don't you worry—it won't take long to find him!"

She barely suppressed a sigh of relief as she relaxed on her seat. It was bad enough, but it was not nearly so bad as she had feared. He still had no concrete knowledge of Roy's whereabouts that would lead to an instant arrest.

"I see!" she said.

"And then, on top of all that, there's you!" He was leaning toward her now. "Perhaps you will be able to help, too. In fact, I'm sure you will! It couldn't be otherwise—for the way in which you came to know anything about that house, and how you knew I was there, is bound to uncover something. Tell me all about it, Enid. It's your turn now."

Yes, it was her turn now! She had been expecting it, knew it must come, yet now it came as a shock. For the moment her mind had been centered only upon the peril in which Roy stood. She moistened her lips as she turned her head and looked out of the window. She couldn't tell just where they were, but they couldn't be very far from her corner now—not that she was any longer trying to postpone the inevitable, but it would make what was to come at least mercifully brief.

"There isn't anything I can tell you," she said dully.

"Nothing you can tell me! Are you joking?" he asked half lightly, half in a puzzled way.

"There isn't anything I can tell you," she repeated monotonously.

"But, Enid!" His voice had grown instantly troubled and anxious. "Surely, you can't mean that! You can't realize what you are saying! Nothing you can tell me! You, in that house! This—this sort of disguise you've put on! Don't you see that it—"

"I see everything," she broke in, her words coming now in a sudden, almost hysterical outburst. "Everything! That what I have done to-night would even warrant the suspicion that—that I was one of the gang myself. And I know that my refusal to say anything only makes it all the worse. But there is nothing that I can say. Nothing. Nothing." She was biting at her lips. The tears were very near. "Oh, I don't know what you will think, but I cannot explain anything. Please, please do not ask me any more!"

His voice came to her quietly, reassuringly:

"TO an outsider it might perhaps, as you say, seem a little suspicious; but to me, on the face of it, of course, that is a sheer absurdity. Listen, Enid. At least tell me this: Did you know I was in that house when you went there?"

"Yes," she said.

"Of course you did!" he asserted with a sudden break in his voice. "And you went there for my sake."

She was silent.

"Enid," his voice was getting out of control, "you should never have taken such a risk! Why didn't you tell the police?"

Again she was silent. She couldn't tell him that she was afraid the police would have waited there and caught Roy, could she?

"There is some simple explanation for it all, I know there is," he went on; "even though for some cause you feel you cannot speak. But don't you realize that if for no other reason than that you saved my life to-night I am in honor bound to respect your confidence? Can't you trust me?"

"Oh, please don't make me say it again," she begged. "I cannot tell you anything."

Her hands were suddenly imprisoned in his, and suddenly he drew her close to him.

"Then trust me for another reason, Enid," he whispered passionately. "You have seen it to-night. You are a woman; you *know*. You know I love

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you. I loved you before to-night—almost from the moment I first saw you. My love is deeper, greater now at this instant, if that is possible, because of what you have done to-night. You risked your life, and more, for me to-night. I love you, Enid. I love you!"

She closed her eyes. He had swept her into his arms. His lips burned like fire on hers. Perhaps the taxi driver saw. How little that mattered. Where was that vaunted boast of hers that he was never to know that she cared?

With a little moan, she tore herself away.

"Don't! Oh, please, don't!" she said piteously. "There—there can never be anything like this between us. Oh, you are making it so hard—so hard! It is not a question of trust. I do trust you. I trusted you when I went to that house. I am trusting you now. If it were known that it was Enid Howard who was in that house to-night, I would be in far greater danger than—"

"Yes, and that's what's driving me nearly mad!" he cried. "If it—"

"Wait," she interrupted desperately. "Let me finish. I want to speak about you. You do not need any further warning to tell you that you are in danger. You should know it only too well now. You said it was the Big Shot who had you taken to that house to-night. But don't you see? You are fighting in the dark. He knows you, and evidently knows what you are trying to do. But you don't know him. He will strike again. How are you going to protect yourself? Oh, why don't you keep out of this? Leave him alone? Leave him to the police!"

"Scared off!" He laughed shortly. "Would you expect that of me? We won't talk about my danger. But I'll tell you now, if it will relieve your fears any, that he has had the only chance he'll ever get at me. There won't be another. He'll be cornered before he can strike again—at me, or any one else!"

SHE could find no words. They would have been useless, anyway. Nothing, she knew, would alter his determination. No man in like position, who was a man, would be "scared off." She twisted her hands together distractedly.

"Enid," he burst out, "what does it all mean? I can't understand! Not only about what has happened to-night, but what you said a moment ago—that there could never be anything between us. Don't you care? You must care! I *know* you care! The way you called me—'Phil'—when you entered that room. I shall never forget that. And no girl would do what you have done if she did not— He broke off abruptly. The taxi had come to a stop, and the driver, reaching out, was opening the door. "What's this?" he exclaimed in a startled way.

"I told him to stop here," she said. "It's my corner."

"I don't understand," he said heavily. "You mean that you don't want the cab to go to your house—that we will get out here and walk the rest of the way?"

There were tears on her cheeks, but she had herself well in hand now. There was one thing still to tell him; one danger that she could, and must, avert—the danger of Phil here and Roy ever meeting in her house.

"No," she said in a low voice, "that is something you must never do. You must never go there, never call there. I cannot give you any explanation for this either; but it would mean great danger, not only for you, but for me. And—and we must never be seen together any more. Please, please remember this—for both our sakes."

There was steel in the gray eyes, and a strange wistfulness, as they studied her.

"I know," he said slowly as though

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measuring his words, "that in the old days, our old days, of the last few weeks, you would never even then let me go to your house; but there was always the Gondola. What you say now, though, would seem to mean almost—almost a final good-by. Do you think I could let you go out of my life like this? You know I couldn't! And"—there was a ring in his voice now—"furthermore, I won't! If, because you say it would mean danger to you, I am not to go to your house, or meet you anywhere in public, when and where, then, am I to see you?"

When and where! This was the parting that she had known must come. A strange parting—for Roy's sake. Duplicity! Trickery! But how, unless he remained a source of information, could she hope to save Roy from the police? How else could she stand between these two, Phil and Roy, and—and try to protect one from the other?

Her seat was the nearer to the curb—and suddenly now she stepped out of the cab.

"I have a telephone," she said—and, running, sped around the corner.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### CROOKS IN COUNCIL.

WAS Roy back? Enid, standing outside the window through which she had left the Big Shot's home, listened intently. It wasn't likely. There was not a sound from within, and all the rear windows of the house were in darkness. If Roy had returned with the news of what had happened the household would hardly be wrapped now in sound and peaceful slumber. And, besides, she had made good time on her return journey from Martha Debbins's house where she had changed into her own clothes again. She had looked at her wrist watch just before she had turned into the lane here. It was still not quite midnight.

For another moment she stood motionless, striving to catch the slightest sound, and then silently and quickly she climbed in over the sill. Inside the room she listened again. She could hear nothing—only the terrible silence pounding at her eardrums. She closed the window noiselessly, and, undressing swiftly in the dark, got into bed.

Sleep? How could she sleep? She was conscious of extreme physical weariness, but her brain was too active, too greatly tormented to permit of sleep. If only she could stop thinking for a little while. But from the moment she had left Phil in the cab her mind had been remorselessly at work.

It had refused to stop. It had seemed to follow a sort of cycle in which at one instant she encountered stray gleams of hope wherewith to buoy herself up, and at the next was left mentally blindfolded, wrestling impotently with dire, terrorizing problems to which she could find no answers.

It had never stopped. It would not stop now.

If it were ever known that it was she who had been in that house tonight the consequences would be unthinkable. Certainly Roy would not lift a finger on her behalf then—and Mrs. Kane and Izzy Myers were already intending to do away with her. Human life meant nothing. If one was in the way, one was removed. Murder, to such people as Mrs. Kane and Izzy Myers, was not momentous; it was an incident.

Yet any description Batty Rose could give of the woman who had been there could not possibly arouse even a suspicion that it was—Enid Howard. Phil was the only one who knew. The secret was, of course, quite safe with Phil. Phil loved her. Phil cared. Phil! Oh, Phil! It was safe with him—but what did he think, what could he think, what must he think?

Her mind raced on. Thoughts of Phil were suddenly submerged as by some onrushing, awesome tidal wave

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that swept everything from its path. Jonvers! They wanted Roy for murder—the murder of a man named Jonvers. Had one the right to try to protect even a brother when the crime was murder? But she did not believe him guilty. She could not believe it. The Kane woman and a man like Izzy would commit murder almost with indifference. She could understand that. They were running true to type. But not Roy. She could not conceive of Roy as being a murderer. Who was Shive Frank to say so?

But even suppose Shive Frank had acted merely out of bitter hatred and a determination to have revenge no matter how it was accomplished, and suppose that everything he had written about Roy was utterly false, that he had set down, say, the stories of actual crimes in which he himself had participated and that he was cunning enough to know could be verified, and had speciously dragged Roy into this, on paper, as the chief actor—suppose all this were so, nevertheless, Shive Frank, from his grave, might still achieve his purpose and send an innocent man to the chair!

Those papers were in a pawnbroker's safe, Schnaffner's safe. Schnaffner lived somewhere on the lower East Side. Any directory would tell her exactly where. Was there any way of getting those papers before Schnaffner returned to the city and delivered them to Phil? Was there any way of opening Schnaffner's safe? Or, if she couldn't do that, was there any way of getting them away from Phil before he turned them over to the police?

IF she could only read them herself first, and judge for herself what weight they would carry in the eyes of the law!

Why was she so sure that Roy could not be guilty of Jonvers's murder, or any other murder? Just because he was Roy? She would have believed it impossible, thinking of Roy as she had known him, that he could have lived a life of crime extending back for over ten years now—and yet she now knew that to be true. Would he have stopped at the murder of Phil to-night? Or stopped his gangsters? Would he stop short of that to-morrow night—if the opportunity offered?

In his life as a racketeer and gangster, had he never shot to kill? And if it were true that Roy had killed this man Jonvers, and that what Shive Frank had written was not merely a cowardly and despicable lie — what then?

No, no! It couldn't be! She couldn't let herself believe it. And yet—if it were so? What was she to do? Hadn't she the right to protect him? Wasn't it more than a right? Wasn't it a duty?

Morally she held him innocent in any case. If his loss of memory had not been cruelly exploited he would be living to-day a clean, honorable and normal life. He was not to blame. It was not his fault. It was something over which he had had no control. He was *entitled* to all the protection she could give him. If she could only stand between him and trouble long enough to win him over, to get him away from his present surroundings and environment, she had the faith to believe that his real nature would reassert itself.

But could she ever hope to do that? If to-night were any criterion of what she would be obliged to do, how long could it possibly last? Her own position was precarious in the extreme. If it were known that it was she who had been in that house to-night, it would—

It was the cycle beginning over again.

From somewhere in the house a clock struck two.

And then suddenly she sat upright in bed. The front door was being flung violently open. There was the stamp of feet in the vestibule. Then the Big Shot's voice in harsh tones evidently calling up the stairs:

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"Hey! Ma! Come down here! And the old man, too! Hop to it!"

She heard the sound of movement from above, and the next instant heard Mrs. Kane's answer, from she presumed, the head of the stairs.

"What is it? What's happened? What's the matter?" the woman shrilled anxiously.

"Matter?" the Big Shot's voice held an ugly laugh. "Hell's blown its lid off, that's what's the matter! Come on! Hurry up, both of you! I'm going out again. I only blew in to wise you up."

Footsteps, those of Mr. and Mrs. Kane undoubtedly, were hurriedly descending the stairs now; came then a confusion of voices from the lower hall, everybody talking at once; and then suddenly the voices became indistinct. They had all gone into that front room, she thought.

Without a sound, she got out of bed and stole to the door. There was a great deal that she, too, wanted to know! She cautiously opened her door a crack. Yes, that's where they were, in the front room. And she could hear quite well now, even from where she was.

There was only one voice speaking now—the Big Shot's:

"Sure, if you'll close your yaps and give me a chance. We were after that guy Martin to put him through and find out how much he knew. Batty Rose was running it, with Skinny and a couple more of the boys, and a car. But they didn't start anything until after dark. Then Batty picked Martin up in Pete Lonezzi's. Martin had Kinger with him and—"

"You mean the police lieutenant?" this a little tremulously and obviously from Mr. Kane.

"YES!" The Big Shot's voice was vicious. "You look white, pop! Get a grip on yourself! Yes, that's who I mean. Batty slid into a seat at the next table and picked up a word or two of what they were saying. Martin said that Shive Frank had spilled the beans in some sort of a written confession about some of the jobs Shive Frank and I had pulled together a few years ago. Martin said he could not get at the papers for several days yet, but as soon as he got them he'd have the goods on me enough times over to send me to a dozen chairs."

Mrs. Kane gave a frightened cry: "Do you think that's true? How much did Shive Frank really know?"

"He knew too much! How can I tell what he's spilled until I see the papers? This is just the thing he would do. The cur was too yellow to come out and fight."

"Where are the papers?" It was Mr. Kane again, still tremulously.

"How the hell do I know?" the Big Shot answered fiercely. "That's one of the things we would have made Martin tell us. *And he will yet!* We'll get him again before he has a chance to pull anything. We've got to get him now!"

"You mean," Mrs. Kane's voice mingled with dismay and fear, "you mean he got away from the birdcage? Izzy Myers said that Batty Rose had him there."

"Yes, he got away!" The Big Shot was snarling now, and Enid could hear him pacing up and down the room as he talked. "Batty trailed Martin out of Pete's, and the car trailed Batty. They got Martin with a blackjack on one of the cross streets, put him in the car, took him down to the birdcage, and roped him up. The others went away and left Batty there with him. And then some woman put one over Batty. Batty let her in because she said she had a message or something from Izzy Myers—and she held Batty up. Then Batty gave her the slip, and she thought he'd run out of the house; but, instead of that, he got through on the tapped wires to Izzy's place. Wilkie and Mullins were at Izzy's, and they gypped the first car they saw and beat it for the

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birdcage. In the meantime the woman had found Martin and untied him, and when Batty tried to stop them from leaving the house, Martin crept up on him in the dark and put him to sleep with a bash over the head. They got out of the house through the window just as Wilkie and Mullins went in.

"The boys heard them and started after them. They weren't for using their rods or making any noise about it, for fear of attracting attention to the house; but Martin, the fool, started shooting, and after that it was all off. Martin and the woman pinched the car. Wilkie and Mullins let 'em have it with their guns, but the car got away. Everybody was running out on the street by that time, and Wilkie and Mullins had to beat it.

"And Batty came to just in time to make his get-away before the police piled into the house."

"The police!" It came in almost a scream from Mr. Kane. "Then we're done! My God, there's almost half a million dollars' worth of snow there! D'ye hear, Norry? They'll find it! There's nothing to stop them!"

"Thanks for letting me into the secret!" The Big Shot's voice was icy. "Of course they'll get it, but it won't do any good to yowl about it! I told you that hell had blown its lid off, didn't I?"

"Yes!" Mr. Kane was obviously in a frenzy of fear and excitement. "With the police in that house, and with what you said about Shive Frank, we'd better blow, too—and do it quick while we've got a chance."

"Blow!" The Big Shot flung out a grating laugh. "Nix! Nothing doing!

"Blow! It's just the height of the season, and things are coming good. That snow's a nasty crack, but we'll make it up. Say, take a chair and sit down—your knees seem to be getting weak! There's nothing to connect us with that house; that Shive Frank stuff may be all the bunk, but whether it is or not we'll get that sneaking Martin cur first. Anyway, they don't even know who the Big Shot that they're looking for is."

"I'M not so sure about that!" It was Mrs. Kane now, more composed, but with a dubious, anxious note still in her voice. "For a few years you handled things from off-stage and nobody knew who the Big Shot was except a few like Izzy Myers, but lately you've been taking a hand again in too many jobs yourself. I've kept telling you it was too risky."

"Yeh? And the word was going around that the Big Shot was too high-hat to associate with the low-brows that worked for him!" The Big Shot's tones were brusque, intolerant. "Besides, the boys were making a mess of things. Job after job was going wrong, wasn't it? Well, forget it!"

"What did Batty say that woman looked like to-night? He saw her, didn't he?"

Enid's fingers gripped tightly at the doorjamb. Mrs. Kane's question had come with startling suddenness.

"Yes, he saw her—but he didn't know who she was. He'd never seen her before. He said she looked like a freak out of a museum. Dirty face, dirty hands, spectacles, clothes like grandma used to wear, and a hat out of the Ark that flopped all over her face."

"No," Mrs. Kane seemed almost to be speaking to herself, "it doesn't sound like her—unless, of course, she was disguised."

"'Her!' Who?" The Big Shot's voice rang out sharply, imperatively. "What are you talking about? We've got to get her, too, if we turn New York inside out.

"Do you think you know who she is? What was it made you say what you did?"

"I was thinking about last night." There was a malicious sniff in Mrs.

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Kane's voice. "It's kind of queer about a woman butting in then, and a woman butting in again to-night. You know she isn't your sister any more than I am. I told you from the start that I was suspicious of her, and that she was up to some game."

"What!" The Big Shot was barking out his words. "You mean Enid Howard? Has *she* gone?"

"Not that I know of." Mrs. Kane's tones were sour. "You said the dear child wasn't to be disturbed. I haven't been near her room. I rather wish I had, now."

"You're crazy!" The Big Shot's voice was rasping, angry. "You've got it in for her—and God help any one you go out after! Why, the girl's too sick to leave her bed. What are you trying to do, start something?"

"I'm only telling you what flashed into my mind." Mrs. Kane's voice was still malicious. "Anyway, I certainly don't trust her."

"Hell!" exploded the Big Shot savagely. "Well, we'll soon see! I'll take a look, and—"

Enid silently closed the door, and running swiftly back across the room, her bare feet noiseless on the carpet, got into bed. Perhaps a minute passed, perhaps two, and then as she lay there watching the door, which she could make out quite well even in the darkness, she saw it begin to open slowly. It made no sound.

She closed her eyes then, simulating sleep.

She heard some one—Roy, of course, it couldn't be any one else—tiptoe across the room to her bedside. She sensed him bending over her. She felt his breath upon her cheek. He seemed to stand there for an interminable length of time—until it seemed that she could no longer lie there quietly, that she must move, cry out, do something, that to breathe in a regular, natural way was beyond her power any more.

And then he tiptoed back across the room again, and the door closed softly—but it was daylight before she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A MATTER OF IDENTIFICATION.

ENID opened the door of Martha Debbins's house, hurried along the hall, and, entering her little living room, turned on the lights. Roy had brought her here. That was his car outside. He had gone around the corner to the avenue for some cigarettes before coming in. She was thankful for the few minutes this gave her alone, not that she had left any trace of her visit here last night—for she had been as careful to put Martha's clothes away as she had been to unload her automatic before leaving the house—but there was Roy's picture in the silver frame!

Perhaps it wouldn't have made any difference, and he probably would have thought nothing of it if she had gone into her bedroom for it, saying that she always kept it on her bureau; but it was much more natural that it should be on the mantel—as it always had been until two nights ago—with those other photographs, similarly framed, of her father and mother.

She ran now into the connecting bedroom, opened her trunk, took out the photograph, and, returning with it, set it on the mantel.

And then she slumped into her desk chair.

It had been a strange day, an anxious day. And now she was a little afraid of this visit here with Roy, not over-confident that he had no ulterior motive back of it, not quite sure what the result would be.

He had come into her room that morning and asked her if she thought she would feel well enough to go over to her rooms with him that evening for the "check-up" he had spoken about the day before—or was she still too ill

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to get up at all? He had spoken in quite a casual manner, but she almost feared that what had seemed to her as almost a hurried move to put her to the proof might have been inspired by the suspicions Mrs. Kane had attempted to instill in him—that, though she believed he had been satisfied that she was sleeping peacefully when he had stolen into her room during the night, his own suspicions might have been aroused.

She had been obliged to make a quick decision—whether to feign continued illness, or to announce cheerfully that she was so much better she was going to get up anyhow, and would be ready to go at any time. The latter, because it disarmed any thought of what might otherwise be construed as an effort to postpone or delay an ordeal that he might think she was afraid to face, seemed the safer course to take—and she had taken it.

He had asked her then if she had a telephone in her house; and had asked her, too, for Martha Debbins's address in Maine. She was afraid he was not altogether so willing to accept her at face value as he had been at first. But, after all, she was on safe ground there! Why should it worry her?

He had told her not to leave her room until he came back in the evening for her—that Runty would attend to her wants. Whether he was intentionally keeping Mrs. Kane and herself apart, she did not know, but she thought so. She was grateful for that. How, knowing what she did, knowing what the woman was plotting, could she have met the other!

She had spoken to no one and had seen no one all day except Runty, who, besides bringing her meals, had put a fresh dressing on her head, substituting for the unwieldy bandage a strip of surgical plaster.

But there was something else that had made the day one of almost intolerable anxiety—an anxiety that had grown with the hours, and was still in no degree relieved. Phil was fully forewarned, and thoroughly on his guard, of course; but had they made another attack on him? If so, had it been successful? What had happened?

She knew nothing. There had been no newspaper on her bedside table that morning, and, though she had asked for one, Runty had consistently "forgotten" about it all day; therefore, she did not even know how Phil in his newspaper account, which would of course be reproduced in all the other papers, had disposed of the woman who had been seen to escape with him from that house last night. She dared not ask Roy or Runty. Neither of them had referred to the night before, and she was not supposed to know anything about it.

THAT, however, was relatively a minor matter. What had taken place? What moves and countermoves had been made? What had Roy done? Had Phil and the police got anywhere? Were they any nearer to the Big Shot's identity than before? Had the dragnet brought Skinny or Batty Rose to the surface? And Phil? Was he still safe?

One thing afforded her a certain measure of relief. It was not merely a matter of getting rid of him, of shooting him down on sight as Shive Frank had been shot, for then, indeed, she would have been desperately afraid since that could be so easily accomplished. But they would not do that, dare not do it—it would defeat their own ends. Those papers in Schnaffner's safe protected Phil in that respect now.

Even if they killed him, they must know that those papers would sooner or later come to light. They would try first to make him tell where the papers were. Yes, but where was Phil?

She did not dare use the telephone. It was too risky. Roy had only gone a few steps away. He would be back at any minute now. There was not

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time. After he had gone she would have a chance—at least she supposed he meant to leave her here. She did not know. He had been strangely noncommittal and untalkative, coming down in the car.

"There are one or two things to settle at your place first, and then we'll talk the rest of it out," he had said.

Why hadn't she been allowed to have a newspaper to-day? Was he going to attempt to trap her or trick her into a slip of the tongue about last night? For, debarred from news, she could not possibly know anything about it unless she was the woman who had been at the birdcage! Perhaps that was it!

The papers were full of it. That much, she knew; for, on her way here with Roy, when they had been slowed in traffic for a moment opposite a newsstand, she had seen one of the scareheads. She could not have helped seeing it, great red type flung full across the page in double lines. She could picture it now:

**POLICE FIND DRUGS IN VACANT HOUSE**

**Seizure Worth Half Million Dollars**

Roy had seen it, too. He had muttered savagely under his breath. Her lips trembled a little. If he only knew! She was glad, glad with all her soul that that much misery had been averted; but, too, she faltered before the significance of it all. It was only one of so many things that Roy was guilty of. He had gone so far! Even if he was not caught by the police, could she ever hope to save him from himself? What was the end?

She rose suddenly to her feet. She had left the front door ajar for him, and he was coming now.

"I am in here," she called out quietly.

He came into the room and, tossing his hat on a chair, stood looking critically around him.

"So this is where you hang out, eh?" he observed. "Not so bad!" His eyes fixed on the mantelpiece. "That the photo you were talking about?"

"Yes," she said—and, going to the mantelpiece, took it down and handed it to him.

He studied it for a moment; and then, with a nod of his head that might have meant anything, laid it on the desk.

Her heart sank as she watched him. He wasn't paying any more attention to the photograph. His eyes were roving over the paraphernalia on the desk—the typewriter, the pad of blank manuscript paper, the typed sheets of story.

"Don't you recognize that photograph?" she asked anxiously. "Doesn't it bring back anything at all to you?"

He shook his head.

"We'll get to that in a minute," he said easily. He picked up and examined one of the finished sheets of manuscript. "Is this part of the book you told me you were writing?"

"Yes," she said again.

He put the sheet of manuscript back on its pile without comment other than another nod of his head.

"Got anything to show," he demanded abruptly, "that you were living in Winnipeg in— When did you say you left there?"

"Three months ago," she answered.

"Yes. Well—anything to show that three months ago you were living in Winnipeg?"

"Any number of things," she responded quickly. "Letters from friends, papers connected with father's death, and, let's see—" She pulled open the drawer of the desk. "Here is my bank book. You'll see that it goes back a long way, and that I still have an account there."

HE took the book, glanced at a few of its pages, handed it back, and, suddenly reaching out to her, patted her on the shoulder.

"Nuff said, kid!" he announced ge-

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nially. "I thought you were straight from the start. But I had to be sure. I'm satisfied. All there is to do now is to knock that brother stuff out of your pretty head."

Pretty head! She did not like the way he said that. A strange sense of apprehension came over her. His hand had closed a little over her shoulder, and he had drawn her nearer to him.

"I don't see how that is possible, since you *are* Roy," she said simply. "Just look at that photograph again."

"Sure! I know," he said. "I guess it looks like me—that's why I'm sure for one thing that you're handing out the straight goods. But no matter how much like me it looks, I'm telling you again it isn't me—and that's on the level, too."

"But it is *you*, Roy," she insisted.

"Nix!" he laughed. "And say, kid, I'm tickled pink it isn't! He's the last guy on earth I'd want to be! You get that, don't you?"

He was closing his arms around her.

"Roy, what are you doing?" she cried in a startled way as she drew back from him. "What—what do you mean?"

"Aw, quit your kidding!" His voice was earnest now, the laughter gone out of it. "You know what I mean. I wouldn't want to be your brother. It isn't only what you did for me the other night—I fell for you from the start.

"I just had to make sure you were not playing any game, because the whole thing was kind of queer. But that's the way it came—hard and quick. You're the only girl that ever got me all the way. And, listen, kid—it was the first look did it, though I was holding on tight till I knew I wasn't being played up."

She caught her breath. "You—your feelings are—were perhaps natural," she faltered. "We are brother and sister. You would instinctively be drawn to me, even though you did not remember me."

"Nothing like that!" he answered. "And that don't go, anyhow, seeing we aren't brother and sister. It's just plain honest-to-God he-man love, Enid, and nothing but!"

She stared at him, confused and frightened. Her hands went to her temples.

"And I?" She tried to keep her voice steady. "Suppose it were true that you were not Roy, that you were a man who had been a criminal all his life—what do you imagine my feelings would be toward such a man?"

"Aw, I'm not worrying about that," he said complacently. "A girl who pulled what you did the night before last would get used to that."

Her hands came down to her sides and clenched.

"You are wrong," she said passionately. "If you were not my brother who had been cruelly and abominably victimized, I would hate you and despise you for what you are and what you have done—and I would crush you if I could!"

He laughed at her in a half amused, half tolerant way.

"YOU'RE a little spitfire, aren't you? That's one thing I love you for. And you've got more sand and nerve than any other girl I've ever met—and that's another reason. And you are *you*—and that's the whole reason. You think you mean what you say now, but one of these days you're going to marry me just the same. I'll risk that. You're the one girl for me, and I'm going to have you!"

Her shoulders had drooped suddenly, her lips were trembling. She had never dreamed that anything like this could happen. It was as though she had built a house of cards that lay suddenly strewn at her feet.

"You are my brother," she said miserably.

"No," he said; "and that's my first job on the way to the altar—to prove I'm not!"

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"You can't prove what isn't true," she answered. "If you could, don't you know that I would expose you?"

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," he returned complacently. "Don't forget that you're wanted by the police yourself. Don't forget the girl bandit. And that helps us to get away on an even start too, doesn't it?"

She made no answer, but as he came toward her again, his hand outstretched, she groped out behind her for the desk chair, and sank into it.

"Don't touch me!" she whispered. "As my brother you would have certain privileges; but you have none while—while you have any other sort of feeling for me."

He stared at her for a moment contemplatively, and then abruptly thrust his hands into his pockets.

"I get you, kid!" His tones were those of one humoring a child. "It's kind of a jolt—being made love to by a guy that you think is your own brother. Sure, it's raw for you, I can see that. But, say, don't you worry—you won't hear another love peep out of me until I've shown you that I'm handing you the straight goods. So it's up to me. But after that—well, you've heard me! I'm not going to lose any sleep about not getting you, some way or other. See?"

"It's quite useless to discuss that phase of it"—her voice was cool and reliant again—"because it can never exist. You are Roy Howard. You are my brother—and, as my brother, I would do anything in the world, risk anything, to save you from the life you are leading, because I know that you are not morally responsible; that you have, through your lost memory, as I told you yesterday afternoon, been victimized and cruelly exploited. You naturally believe that you are some one else. You have been made to believe it. But you are, nevertheless, Roy Howard. There could be no proof, but only false testimony, to the contrary."

He swung himself onto the edge of the desk, and, lighting a cigarette, grinned at her now quizzically.

"You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" he inquired. "Well, so am I—sure of myself. But the difference is that I know, and you only think you do. Let's go to it. That's the one reason, outside of that little check-up that I had to put over, why I'm here. Listen! What I told you about losing my memory and coming back from the war is all true—but you believe that, too. What you don't believe is that I was born in Chicago and lived there—but that's also true. And I'll tell you how I know it. Sometimes I've had little flashes of memory come over me, queer little bits of scenes. You get me? Police stuff. That would not have been in Winnipeg, would it? Was your brother ever run in by the police there?"

SHE did not answer him for a moment. Her lips seemed suddenly to have become dry and parched. If—if this were true! For the first time her certainty and assurance wavered, and even the bare possibility that he was not Roy, a possibility that had never before found lodgment in her mind, left her nerveless and shaken—but only for an instant, only until she could think clearly again.

These fragments of scenes out of the past were not actual, but imaginary.

Izzy Myers and the Kanes, in order to convince him of his past, would have to supply him with spurious details of just such things as these. And in his condition of mind their constant repetition had finally had the inevitable effect of making him believe they were not only real, but were the evidence, perhaps, of returning memory. Why, people even in normal mental health came to believe their own fabrications if they repeated them often enough. She told him so.

"Yeh?" he said. "You don't let go



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easily, do you? Maybe if I let you take my finger-prints and send them to Chicago, you'd change your mind."

"I wish you would!" she returned. "I'm sure there are none there that would have the same classification."

"Nothing doing!" he exclaimed with a short laugh. "I'm not asking for trouble. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it, but I had something else in mind that's like that sort of identification in a way. It's not only people's fingers. Most people carry around on their bodies some little distinctive mark that they were either born with or else collected in the shape of scars and cuts and that sort of thing while they were kids. Do you believe that?"

"A great many people do, of course," she admitted. "But that has nothing to do with the present case. You, Roy, didn't have any."

"You mean you don't know of any," he amended coolly. "They don't always stand out a mile, and they might be so insignificant that they weren't perhaps even known to the person himself. But to his nurse, say—she ought to know, eh? How long did you say that Martha of yours was your brother's nurse?"

She passed her hands nervously across her eyes. Yes, Martha, of course—but Martha wouldn't need anything of that sort, even if it existed. She would know him instantly.

"From the time he was born," she answered mechanically. "It seems strange to have to tell you that she was with us for years and years."

He nodded. "I asked you for her address in Maine this morning—remember?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, that's why!" he said. "I telegraphed her to call you up on the long distance here between half past eight and half past nine to-night—"

The telephone was ringing.

The Big Shot laughed.

"There's your Martha now," he said. "Ask her about it!"

**TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.**

## *The World's Largest Diamonds*

THE largest diamond ever found was unearthed in Brazil—a black diamond weighing three thousand three hundred carats; the largest white diamond was the Cullinan, three thousand and thirty-four in the rough, or three-quarters of a pound. The Cullinan was presented to King Edward VII by the South African government, and cut by Asscher, of Amsterdam, into four pieces, for the English royal regalia.

The next in size was the Premier, three thousand and twenty-three carats. The famous Kohinoor, or "Mountain of Light," originally weighed seven hundred and ninety-four carats, but was reduced to one hundred and two and one-half in the cutting. The Orloff ranks as one of the biggest diamonds of the world, it was set in the Czar's scepter, and, like the precious stones of popular fiction, was once one of the eyes of an idol in a Hindu temple. It was stolen by a French soldier who sold it to an English sea captain for two thousand pounds. Many believe it to be the renowned Great Mogul, which disappeared in 1739 when Nadir Shah, who then owned the Kohinoor, seized the gem in a raid on the Great Mogul, by whose name it was known, and who had worn it in his turban. The Shah took it back to Persia with him and there it dropped out of sight forever.

Other diamonds noteworthy for size and beauty are the Hope, Sancy, Pigott, Dresden, Nassak, Polar Star, Excelsior, Maximilian, and Etoile du Sud, a Brazilian stone. *Minna Irving.*



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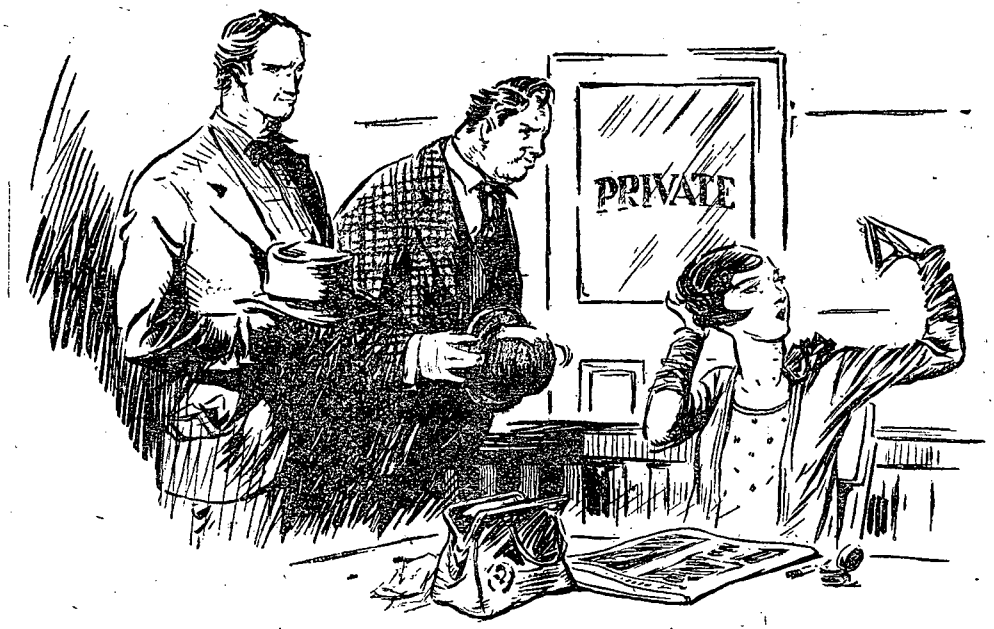


*Bill ventured mildly: "Would you mind telling Mr. Keeler that a couple of his old pals would like to see him?"*

# Bids

***Bill and Jim would have tried to squeeze blood—or a hand-out—from any turnip; but they never tackled a drier turnip than their one-time "friend," Joe Keeler***

***By JOHN H. THOMPSON***

"SO this is where Joe carries on his flirtations with Mammon," I remarked critically as we surveyed the gilt letters on the door which proclaimed:

**JOSEPH L. KEELER**
**Sewer Contractor**
**Estimates Cheerfully Furnished**

I wasn't particularly impressed. "Sewer contractor" forecast ditch-digging jobs. But we weren't in a position to be choosers; we had reached the stage where we had to land a temporary job of some kind or starve to death.

Joe had borrowed half a dollar from us back in the dim past and as soon as Bill discovered that Joe was located in this burg he decided to call upon him—not with any hope of getting the half dollar back, for we had known Joe too well in those early days, but in the hope of getting some kind of a soft job from him.

"Maybe nature has spread herself remodeling Joe's character in the past ten years," said Bill hopefully as we opened the door of the office and entered.

As soon as we lamped the interior of the office we knew that Joe had struck it rich. Rugs and mahogany were as conspicuous there as freckles and dirt on the face of a street urchin.

A supercilious young damsel looked up as we entered and paused long enough in her task of powdering her nose to inform us that Mr. Keeler was in conference.

"We'll wait until he wakes up," said Bill calmly. Bill is familiar with mod-



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ern business methods as portrayed in the comic strips.

The damsel proceeded to ignore us as completely as though we were a pair of discarded cigar-butts on the edge of a wash room shelf. We sat down.

Right opposite us was a door leading to an inner room. It was labeled "Private." Somewhere beyond that was the conference that was delaying our supper.

The door swung open and a florid guy came out. In size and prosperous appearance he was a living image of one of those birds pictured in cartoons as sitting on a pile of money bags and wearing a dollar sign on his vest.

He was just stepping over the threshold when a voice from the inner regions called him back.

Bill sighed dismally. It looked as if the conference was to be resumed. I plucked up hope, though, when I noticed that the door had merely been pulled partly shut without being closed tightly. The voice of the florid-faced fellow percolated through the crack:

"By the way, I've got that Traymore Street job sewed up for you, Joe. Your bid of five thousand will be the lowest. The others will stumble over that elbow clause and will be sure to add two thousand too much. Five thousand will give you a good margin. Chicken feed, of course, but it all helps. Bids open to-morrow at eleven. Don't forget the usual fee. You gypped me on that last one, you know."

We could hear the murmur of another voice but could not detect the words.

"Looks as though our Joe had edged his way up to the public trough," I whispered to Bill.

"He'd do it if he had a chance," muttered Bill grimly.

The door to the private office opened again and the red-faced bird emerged for the second time. He scowled at the damsel, scowled at Bill and me, scowled at the world in general and passed out into the corridor and out of the picture so far as we were concerned.

BILL and I got up and waited expectantly. The damsel was engaged in trying to see the back of her head in a mirror the size of a boarding-house fritter.

"If it won't interfere with the work of beautifying the office fixtures, would you mind telling Mr. Keeler that a couple of his old pals would like to see him," ventured Bill mildly.

"Where are your cards?" snapped the damsel.

"We don't need any cards," said Bill with dignity. "Just tell him that Bill and Jim are out here."

The damsel arose languidly, gave us a disdainful stare and disappeared into the private office.

"Two shabby-looking strangers," he heard her say. "Gave their names as Bill and Jim; claimed to be old friends of yours."

"I haven't got time to bother with them." It was Joe's voice; there was no mistaking it. "Tell them I'm busy, tell them anything you want, but make them get out. If they don't get out, call a policeman and have them thrown out."

I looked at Bill and Bill looked at me.

"I'm not going to let that dame deliver such a message to me," declared Bill, with determination. We turned and strode out of the office.

"Ain't that a nice way for an old side-kick to treat his former pals?" demanded Bill, his voice quivering with indignation as we stood in the corridor. "When he was in trouble and broke we loaned him our last half dollar. Now look at the way he acts. The dirty, grafting snob."

I gently steered Bill toward the elevator. I was afraid he might become violent.

He continued to sputter long after we got down to the street.

"I'm going to get that half dollar

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back with interest," he declared doggedly.

"You've got a fat chance of getting anything out of that fellow," I remarked encouragingly. "If you asked him for the half dollar he'd have you arrested on a charge of hunting eagles on a private preserve, and drag me in as an accessory before the fact."

"I wouldn't ask that guy for permission to throw a dead dog into one of his sewer trenches," growled Bill scornfully; "partly because I know he wouldn't give anybody anything, but chiefly because I wouldn't want to insult a dead dog."

"But how—"

Bill interrupted me impatiently.

"What was the name of that street? Tree—Trem—Traymore, that was it," he ejaculated triumphantly. "Come on over to City Hall."

Bill proceeded to squander golden moments which should have been devoted to raising funds for meals and lodgings. He dug up a copy of the Traymore Street sewer proposal. Then he trailed around to the public writing room of the city's leading hotel and wrote out a bid for the job, quoting four thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars and fifty cents which would be fifty cents under Joe Keeler's bid. He lost no time getting this to the city engineer's office.

WHAT he intended to do if he got the contract Bill himself didn't know. The proposal stated that the successful bidder would have to post a bond of five hundred dollars within twenty-four hours after the bids had been opened, otherwise the next lowest bidder would get it. There wasn't a single chance that Bill and I could raise a bond of five hundred dollars.

We slept in the park that night—the members of the new sewer contracting firm of Bill Higgins and Jim Jones—and it was uncomfortable sleeping. The discomforts were forgotten the next day, however, when the city engineer's office announced that the Traymore Street job had been awarded to Higgins & Jones for four thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars and fifty cents.

The only bug floating around in Bill's cup of satisfaction was the fact that he couldn't see Joe's face when the news percolated into the setting of mahogany and rugs.

Joe's bid, as we had known it would be, was five thousand dollars. There were half a dozen others ranging from seven thousand dollars up. The lobster-faced guy's dope about the involved clause raising a cloud of dust in the eyes of the contractors had been as accurate as the dope of an inner-circle tout as to the outcome of a fixed race.

It seemed to me, though, that aside from occasioning Joe a temporary annoyance, Bill and I didn't have much to cheer about. We had a four thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars and fifty cents sewer contract that wouldn't be any good unless we posted five hundred dollars within twenty-four hours; and even if we had the five hundred dollars it wouldn't do us much good because all we knew about sewer construction was that it afforded a good excuse for ripping up surfaces of city streets.

"Well, we win, anyhow," ejaculated Bill cheerfully.

"Win what?" I asked lugubriously. "What good does this gol-dinged contract do us?"

"Haven't we trimmed that dirty geezer?"

"Yeh, but who'll be doing the laughing when the twenty-four hours are up and we don't produce that bond?"

I STAGGERED under a terrific blow on my back that made my teeth rattle. Bill, too, had been taken unawares and was reeling. We swung around to confront the attacker.

"Well, well, if it ain't my old pals, Bill Higgins and Jim Jones!" The at-

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tacker was none other than Joe Keeler, who had tossed the key of the city into our faces the day before. There was a smirk on his face and we realized that the unexpected blows were supposed to have been friendly. It was just like Joe, though, to combine pleasure with friendship by sneaking up on a pair of his old-time pals and giving them a couple of dirty swats.

"I haven't seen you since the day I left the Peterson shows ten years ago," continued Joe while Bill and I were trying to recover ourselves.

"You could have seen us yesterday," said Bill coldly.

Joe flushed and ignored the remark. There was an awkward period of silence. I was thinking of the cold shoulder that Joe had given us the day before. I guessed that Bill was thinking of the same thing.

"I see you two are in the contracting business now," said Joe finally. "Who tipped you off about that trick clause in the Traymore Street proposal? If some skunk up in the city engineer's office squealed, he'll get the boot. We can't let outsiders come in here and scoop up the cream." His tone was sneering. Joe couldn't conceal his colors any more than a leopard could lick off its spots. He waited for a reply, but didn't get one.

"Now look here, you two guys," he continued shaking his finger at us. "I had it all fixed up to get that Traymore Street job and I'm not going to let anybody grab it away from me. I can clean up a couple of thousand on it, but you two can't tackle it at all. You haven't got the equipment and I doubt if you've got the bond." He scornfully eyed our shabby clothing.

"Yeh?" Bill's affection for our erstwhile pal certainly wasn't increasing.

"Yeh," retorted Joe mockingly. "I'd get the contract to-morrow anyhow after you birds fail to put up the bond, but just so as to make sure there'll be no slip-up, I'm willing to be generous." He dug a hand into his pocket. "Here's ten dollars. You birds clear out of town and forfeit your contract." He peeled a bank note off his roll.

Bill eyed the ten dollars with scorn. Joe hesitated.

"Well, I'll make it twenty dollars," he growled angrily. "But you'll have to transfer the contract to me in writing. You're a pair of grafters. Here, take the money and get out of town—or rather I'll have my chauffeur take you out so as to make sure that you won't double cross—"

"I see you're the same old Joe," Bill interrupted him scornfully. "The same old cheap skate."

"What d'you mean?" sputtered Joe.

"A piker like you couldn't buy this contract for any amount," said Bill. "Crowley & Rowe, the firm that bid too high because of that crooked clause, is going to buy it from us, put up the bond and do the work."

Joe's face fell. Then, without another word, he turned and strode away.

"Ain't he a fine specimen?" demanded Bill in disgust as he watched the disappearing figure.

"Say, Bill, I didn't know that Crowley & Rowe were going to buy that contract," I interposed.

"They don't know it themselves yet," replied Bill calmly. "But they will pretty quickly. If Joe Keeler is willing to give twenty dollars, an honest firm would give one hundred dollars after they wake up to that trick clause. For once in his life Joe gave something away," chuckled Bill.

"Gave something away? How do you figure that out?" I demanded.

"He gave us a danged good tip," grinned Bill.

And an hour or so later when we emerged from the Crowley & Rowe offices with one hundred and fifty dollars in our treasury, I had to concede that Bill was right—absolutely right.

THE END.

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*Eric edged his way through the mad throng*

# The Radio Flyers

***In the fantastic world inside the earth, explorer Eric Redmond and his Viking allies wage a titanic fight against savage skraeling hordes—with a traitor in the Norse ranks***


**By RALPH MILNE FARLEY**

***Author of "The Radio Man," "The Radio Beasts," and "The Radio Planet"***


## LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MYSTERIOUS radio messages, which seem to come from underground near the North Pole, are fully received at last by means of underground antennæ. They tell of a secret polar expedition sent by the Milwaukee *Eagle*.

Eric Redmond and Angus Selkirk, the flyers, crashed on the ice. Eric floated on toward the pole, on an iceberg, while Angus, repairing the plane, flew on. Both reach the top of the world, and pass through the great hole in the earth where the North Pole is supposed to be, going on inside the world's hollow shell.

Inside, everything is strange—a fixed "sun" in the center of the hollow earth, and hence directly overhead all the time; no night, a continual tropical day. The inhabitants are Norse-speaking Vikings, descendants of explorers from Greenland, and an enemy race of "skraelings," Eskimo-like savages.

Eric rescues a blond Viking girl, Helga Uppri, daughter of the bishop-ruler. She is carried off, and Angus, searching for her with the plane, gets Astroo, daughter of the skraeling chief Goovah, by mistake. Helga manages to join them again, and the four of them are besieged on top of a mesa by skraelings. The plane has run out of


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gas; but they build two man-carrying gliders. Angus and Astroo remain on the rock, while Helga and Eric fly over the skraeling host toward the sea, hoping to summon Viking aid. They are picked up by the Viking vessels, and a war expedition, led by Bishop Thorvald Uppri and his son Mikjel, sets out.

They attack the skraelings, led by Goovah and his son Altoonah. Mikjel is knocked down, and Goovah stands over him to slay him with a final blow —with no Viking near enough to save the bishop's son.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### "YOU CANNOT MARRY."

NOTHING, it seemed, could save the prostrate and unconscious Mikjel from the descending blow of the war club of the skraeling chieftain.

Suddenly, w i t h o u t warning, the Goovah pitched forward on his face above the body of his intended victim. And then a sound followed the thing which had done the deed: a shot rang out on the sultry air. A piece of steel-jacketed lead, a quarter of an inch in diameter, traveling at a velocity which outranged the sound of the rifle, had done what all the brawn of the sturdiest of the Vikings had failed to accomplish. A single small American bullet had ended the career of the mightiest chieftain of the land of the central sun. Goovah, king of the skraelings, was dead. M i k j e l still lived.

The savage hordes, cheated of victory when it was almost within their grasp, r e c o i l e d in dismay, and the cheering winged hats pressed forward again. As the Norse wave passed the two silent forms, Eric Redmond yanked the body of Goovah unceremoniously to one side, and, kneeling on the ground beside Helga's brother, took the latter's head in his lap. The glassy eyes began to roll. The mighty muscles twitched. A groan escaped the bearded lips.

"Let me at him," murmured a thick voice, and Mikjel Uppri attempted to rise.

But he fell back in Eric's arms and groaned again.

A shadow darkened the sun. Eric looked up. Standing over him was a red-haired, red-bearded man, clad in a simple doeskin shirt, and holding a smoking rifle in the crook of his left elbow.

"Any one else you want bumped off?" inquired Angus Selkirk nonchalantly.

"You old brick!" ejaculated his friend. "That bullet of yours came in the nick of time. It has saved the day for us, and has saved the life of Helga's brother as well."

"I'm glad," said Angus simply. "I heard the noise of the fighting, and scrambled down the shaft to see if I couldn't help."

They looked toward the plateau. In a cloud of red pollen, the Norsemen were driving the fleeing skraelings to the southward. Leaderless once more, the savages could no longer withstand the victorious attack.

From across the plain toward the sea Helga came running. She flung her arms around her brother and sobbed: "Mikjel! Mikjel!"

But Eric reassured her with: "He lives, Helga. He is only stunned. He will come around in a minute." And then recounted to her what had occurred.

She looked up at the Scot with eyes welling with gratitude, and said: "I can never thank you enough. But alas, I fear that your Astroo will not feel the same, for you have slain her father."

Angus gasped and said nothing. His face was a tragic mask.

When the pursuing Vikings could find no more skraelings on whom to avenge their dead, they returned and

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clustered around their fallen leader. Mikjel by this time was sitting up, looking about him in a bewildered manner.

"The last thing that I knew," he said, "was when that skraeling cracked me on the side of my skull. And now he is dead, and I am alive. I can hardly believe it."

"This is the man who did the deed," announced Eric, introducing Angus.

"Mighty as an elephant!" commented Mikjel. "I welcome Angus Raudha into our clan."

All the Norsemen held their right hands aloft and hailed their new member.

Next they took account of losses; forty-one slain and nearly a dozen badly wounded. Helga suggested that the party camp on the impregnable plateau and send back word to their main settlement in the south for reenforcements, lest the skraelings return to the attack in force. This plan was accepted, and a small detachment was dispatched to the beach to fetch the women.

MEANWHILE Helga and the two Americans ascended the shaft, with about half of the Vikings. On the way to the stone village of the plateau the girl managed to draw Angus one side and impress on him the life and death necessity of dissembling his affections for the skraeling slave-girl.

But these cautionings proved to be quite unnecessary. They found Astroo in tears; and when she perceived Angus she flew into a bitter and vituperative rage. Finally, on becoming reasonably coherent, she transmitted through Helga—for she refused to speak directly to the murderer of her father—the information that she never wished to see elephant-face again. Her outburst did much to prevent the newcomers from suspecting that there had even been an affection between these two.

The wounded, however, could not wait upon the anger and grief of a skraeling slave. Eric and Angus brought the block and tackle from the rock of the *skwaa* to the edge of the cliff. Slings were made of leather from the skraelings' tents. The wounded were hoisted up onto the plateau and then conveyed to the stone village, where they were placed under the tender ministrations of the two girls and the other women when they arrived.

At the first opportunity Eric consulted Angus on the subject of the leopard skin, which it seemed he would have to provide in order to win the hand of Helga.

"You are out of luck," announced Angus, "although you are better off than I am, for my girl won't even speak to me. That isn't a leopard skin; it's the skin of a saber-tooth tiger, the most vicious of all prehistoric beasts. You wouldn't have a ghost of a chance with one. It's done only in stories."

So thoroughly had these two men become assimilated into the Norse civilization that the use of rifles in this connection never occurred to them.

"But the spots!" Eric objected.

"The spots?" Angus exclaimed. "They won't help you any. Oh, I see what you mean. You mean why isn't it striped if it's a tiger? The saber-tooth wasn't really a tiger; it was a cat, the direct ancestor of domestic tabby.

"Tabby, for her size, is the fiercest fighter of all her genus. So imagine a tomcat, which can lick a dog ten times his weight, and then increase that tomcat as large and half again as a Bengal tiger."

"But the skin Helga used to wear wasn't as big as that."

"Pooh!" snorted the Scot. "Altoonah only killed a baby one."

All the able-bodied men were put to work carting the bodies of the slain to the shore and then to rounding up

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the pack of *hoonder*—the wild hyenas which had been passed on the way to the fight. Eric cringed at the thought of these unclean beasts feasting on the corpses of the noble dead, but he concealed his squeamishness and joined in the round-up.

The huge beasts were easily located and driven to the beach, Mikjel expressing great gratification that "now we can have a real Viking funeral."

Eric and Angus held adjoining places in the line. When the quarry was sighted, the former asked: "I suppose that these, too, are some strange sort of prehistoric beast."

"Yes," replied the Scot, "they seem to be hyenodonts, the ancestors of dogs and wolves and foxes, and also of the hyenas of to-day, which have not developed far beyond their Eocene forbears."

"Hyenas of to-day!" snorted Eric. "What do you call these? The animals of this central world are certainly upsetting all my ideas of geological epochs."

THE drive continued. When they reached the beach, the men, to Eric's surprise and relief, instead of feasting the hyenas on the bodies of the slain, promptly attacked the dogs, until forty-one had been killed.

Then one of the Norse ships was piled with driftwood, on which were placed the hero dead, each still clad in his armor.

The hands of each man were clasped about a rude wooden cross on his breast. At the feet of each a dead dog was laid. The gaudy striped sails were unfurled to an offshore breeze. Shields were placed along the gunwales. The pyre was lit. And the flaming craft floated out to sea, a fit funeral for these brave warriors of old!

They watched her till she sank. Then they rowed two of the three remaining barges along the shore empty, until they found a little fiord, in which they concealed the two ships, by covering them with brush and trailing vines.

Litters were made by placing the handles of two oars on the shoulders of one man, and the blades on the shoulders of another. On these litters were placed all the goods from the ships, except just enough to fit out the one craft still remaining drawn up on the beach.

The caravan then proceeded inland to the plateau, leaving a light guard at the beach, just enough to launch the boat to safety, if enemies should appear. At the cliffs, the derrick was put into use once more. Then the men scrambled up the shaft, the sealing rock was locked in place at the top, and all were glad to turn in after a long and hard "day."

No camp fires and songs preceded this rest. The men merely quaffed some cold water from the spring, snatched a bite from the food which the women had been preparing, spread skins helter-skelter on the ground, and dropped off to sleep.

The next few "days" were busy ones. The tumbled-down stone houses were repaired. The skraeling leather tents and utensils and weapons were gathered up, but nothing was done with the enemy corpses. The *skwaas* and the beasts of prey were already attending to them.

An exception was, however, made of the body of Goovah, the mighty skraeling chief. Of course, it would be an insult to their own dead to give him a Viking funeral, but he was buried on the plain in his armor, with his war club by his side, and a huge mound of stones was heaped on the spot.

No trace could be found of the body of his son, Altoonah.

Two of the wounded Norsemen died, and Eric began to wonder if they would sacrifice another whole barge for just these two. But they were not so profligate as all that. Instead, a sail-

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ing raft was built to hold the pyre. Only one hyenodont could be found; but some ingenious person solved the difficulty by splitting the dog in two, from stem to gudgeon, and by laying each half at the feet of one of the heroes, open side down, so that it looked like a whole dog.

Eric conjured up to himself the quaint picture of the spirits of these two heroes approaching Valhalla, each guarded by half a dog. This thought nearly spoiled the seriousness and solemnity of the occasion for him.

Angus Selkirk and Mikjel Uppri struck up a great friendship for each other, and the latter announced that, because of his general admiration for elephant-face, and more particularly because the red-bearded one had saved his life, he was going to make a blood-brother of him.

At this there was some grumbling among the Norsemen, for they were jealous of the attentions of their prince.

One of them, named Glúm, even went so far as to voice his views, saying:

"Is there sufficient reason for this distinction, O Mikjel?"

"There is," replied Mikjel with determination. "The sufficient reason is that I wish it."

This silenced Glúm for the time.

The brotherhood ceremony was very impressive. Three long strips of sod were dug with swords, and were draped across two spears, so as to form a low arch. The spears were held horizontal by two warriors. One piece of turf hung down on each side, and the third piece rested on the upper ends of the other two and stretched across from spear to spear.

Under this arch crawled Mikjel and Angus. Sitting thereunder, each pricked the palm of his own right hand with the point of his hunting-knife, let some drops of blood fall on the ground, and then clasped the bloody hands together and swore a mighty oath before God and the attendant company, that either would avenge the other's death.

EACH day—there is no use putting quotation marks around that word, but it must be remembered that the motionless sun of the central world does not divide time into days as we know them, and that accordingly a day there is merely the period between sleeps—each day after the last meal there were always stories and songs, while the men whittled and the women sewed or wove or spun.

The two Americans were naturally in great demand to narrate their adventures in the frozen north, and to describe Green Land (hitherto supposed to be a mere mythical locality), and Vinland (i. e., America).

They gained quite a reputation as liars; but lying is no crime among the Norsemen. Slander is. To make fun of a man was the worst offense known to their laws. There were two forms of this crime: word-sneering and wood-sneering, the latter consisting in whittling an uncomplimentary effigy. Thus the two corresponded roughly to our slander and libel.

This taboo on disrespect more than atoned, in livability, for the roughness and frequently uncouthness of these lusty bearded fighters. It is most reassuring to have the constant realization that, no matter what fool thing one does, one will never be laughed at.

The Americans' tales of their plane and gliders were frankly disbelieved, although corroborated by Astroo as to the former, and by both girls as to the latter. So the gliders were fetched and repaired, and demonstrated; and the plane was found and exhibited. The two young flyers explained that the lack of magic water was all that kept them from demonstrating this craft, too.

The airship had been riddled with spear-thrusts, but the natives had evidently feared to actually touch it, for

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its contents were intact. Accordingly everything, including the two radio sets, was carted to the plateau.

As soon as the sets had been brought Angus rigged up an aërial and announced that he was going to tune in a program.

He quoted in English:

"And those musicians, that shall play to you,
Hang in the air a thousand leagues from hence,
And straight they shall be here; sit, and attend."

"What's that from?" Eric asked.

"Owen Glendower says it in one of Shakespeare's historical plays, I forget which."

But, although the Vikings sat and attended, the musicians somehow failed to show up.

Eric and Angus both went carefully over the entire set. There appeared to be nothing the matter with it, but it wouldn't pick up a single station.

Said Angus to Eric: "Come to think of it, I wasn't able to pick up a thing in my various camps while looking for you. I believe that it's impossible to send through the shell of the earth, and that some meteorological conditions must prevent the ether waves from coming in through the polar orifice."

"I tell you what!" suggested Redmond. "Let's take the other set down to the beach and broadcast from there."

So it was arranged that this be done immediately after sleep.

THE next day Eric and Otho the Silver-tongued made a litter of two spears and some leather, and carted one of the radio sets down to the sea. As they were passing through the jungle they saw a large elk come trotting toward them up the trail. Hastily they dropped their burden to the ground and unslung their spears from the leather.

The deer saw them just before it reached them, and halted. Otho cast his spear, but missed. The animal went crashing off into the jungle at right angles to the trail. The two men rushed forward to the point where it had disappeared, and gazed after it, but the underbrush was too thick for them to follow.

As they were thus engrossed a twig cracked. Otho looked around, let out a cry of surprise, and bolted up the trail. Eric wheeled, and there before him, padding softly toward him, was a spotted feline as large as a horse, or at least so it seemed to the man.

He stepped backward a pace. The handle of his spear, still under his right arm, caught in something behind him.

When, in calm detachment one reviews a situation like that, it seems obvious that the thing to do would be to drop the spear and climb a tree. But Eric was completely stunned by surprise. He clung to the spear, as drowning men clutch at straws, and pushed it backward in an attempt to dislodge it. The butt bumped against some hard and solid object.

Then the saber-tooth tiger sprang! Full on Eric it sprang. There was a splintering crash, and a dull thud. Eric sprawled beneath the heavy form.

The tiger struck out viciously in all directions. It mauled Eric frightfully, although his chain armor was considerable protection. But the beast's efforts did not seem to be directed with any very intelligent purpose. Also it appeared to have overshot him in its spring, for its fierce jaws were beyond him. And it lay sprawled upon him, and did not attempt to rise.

Suddenly, however, it leaped into the air with one bound, like a cat in a fit, and began turning somersaults down the path. Eric lost no time in scrambling up a tree, whence he viewed the beast's peculiar antics.

And then he understood the cause: the broken shaft of his spear protruded from the beast's breast. Eric had ac-

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cidentally held the spear at exactly the right angle, and the spear-butt had lodged squarely against a tree behind him just as the beast sprang. Result: the splintering crash which he had heard. The tiger had been swung over his head on the spear, like a pole-vaulter, and had hit its head against the tree.

The beast was by now writhing upon its back. A sudden idea occurred to Eric; so, climbing hurriedly down, he ran over to where the death throes were taking place, and delivered the *coup de grâce* with his hunting knife.

"HAIL, O hero!" shouted a voice from a near-by tree, as Otho clambered down and joined him. Together they skinned the huge carcass, and cached the hide and head in the crotch of a tree. Then cutting a sapling to take the place of the broken spear, they reslung the radio set and were about to proceed when Eric stopped.

"No," said he. "Valuable and irreplaceable as is this magic box, the tiger skin means more to me right now."

So the radio was cached in the tree, and the trophy of the hunt was carried down to the beach. When they had got it safely there they sent two of the boat guards back for the radio set. Meantime Eric rigged up an aërial, and when the men returned with the set, soon got Angus on the air.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### VIKING GIFTS.

THE Norsefolk, assembled on the plateau, were astonished, to hear a human voice issuing from the bark funnel to which the Scot had attached the earphones. They were more astonished to recognize the voice as that of Eric Redmond. They were even more astonished when, after a brief announcement, the musical tones of Otho the Silver-tongued burst forth in song.

It was a new saga which he sang for them, the saga of a mighty huntsman, who suddenly finds himself and a lone friend attacked by Groo, the long-toothed tiger, terror of the woods. No match for this huge beast, the two puny men turn to flee. The friend trips on a trailing vine. The hunter faces back again, and stepping across the prostrate form, drives his spear full into the breast of the murderous man-eater.

At this point another voice was heard to break into the story with: "I did no such thing!"

Then muffled argument.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mikjel in the audience. "He sings of our Eric. And our Eric is truly modest of his great accomplishment."

Helga thrilled, but could hardly believe that the story could be true.

Meanwhile the saga continued. Otho sang how the lance had splintered, and how the hunter, drawing his tiny knife, had leaped within the embrace of the sinewy arms. Then descriptions of the hot breath, bared fangs, rending talons, and more such details, which only a trained saga-maker like Otho could conjure up. Finally the pin-pricks of the knife tell. The vanquished tiger rolls in the dust. The victor places his foot on the fallen head. The friend arises and warmly clasps his hand.

Eric cut off further encomiums by seizing the microphone and announcing: "Station XER signing off for the night."

Loud applause rang out on the plateau.

Helga's comment was: "Maidens admire in their wooers not so much good looks as brave needs nobly done."

But Glúm looked positively embittered as he muttered: "It's only a story."

Eric and Otho slept at the ship, and brought the hide and the two twelve-

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inch teeth back with them after their sleep. On the way up Otho persuaded Eric not to deny the truth of the saga. What a wonderful newspaper reporter Otho would have made!

Great was the approval of the Norsemen. Great was the joy of Helga. And almost as great was the joy of her brother Mikjel.

"You can't wear this hide, O my sister," said he, "for look, it measures nearly twice your length."

Glúm was quite discomfited, and the reputation of the radio went up almost as much as did Eric's.

The tiger-killer's wounds were pretty severe; so much so, in fact, that one of the guards from the ship had had to take his p l a c e as bearer. Astroo brought crushed herbs and poulticed him so ostentatiously that he remarked in English to Angus who stood by: "She is coming around. She cares enough for you now to try to pretend that she doesn't care."

Selkirk felt quite cheered.

Mikjel announced that it was now time to send back a ship for supplies, reënforcements and the women of the colonists. Eric and Helga would accompany the ship. Angus, being his blood-brother, would stay with him.

So Helga told Astroo to prepare to accompany her. The slave-girl's face fell, in spite of her efforts to conceal her feelings.

"YOU need not go, if you do not wish," her mistress assured her.

Then, of course, Astroo protested volubly that she would much prefer to take the trip; but Helga, having sounded out her true feelings, was adamant. And so the slave-girl was loaned to Freya, Mikjel's wife, to whom Helga confided Angus's love for the little skraeling.

On the Scot she forcibly impressed the life-and-death necessity of letting no one else in on the secret.

As soon as the state of Eric's tiger wounds would permit, a crew of fifty were told off, the ship was packed, the striped sail was set, the oars bent to the task, and the Viking barge set forth.

The whole settlement, except only one guard at the plateau to open the shaft, came down to the beach to see them off and cheer them on their way.

The tiger skin had been tanned, and Helga brought it along to use in impressing her father with her lover's valor. Eric had, of course, been frank enough to tell her—although to her alone—the true facts of his adventure with the saber-tooth, but she preferred to believe Otho's story, so that was all the good it did.

Eric brought along the radio set and one of the twenty-four hour clocks which had been in the airplane. Angus kept the other. It was arranged that they were to tune in on each other for ten minutes every time the hands pointed to twenty o'clock; i. e., eight o'clock in the evening, if there had been any evening in this central world.

As the dragon ship proceeded southward it very soon passed into warmer water, and warmer and more humid air. Evidently the temperate zone of the central world is very narrow, extending only for a hundred miles or so within the polar rim. All else is subtropical, with palms and tree ferns and lush mosses.

The narrow temperate zone contains life like that which peopled the outer earth in tertiary times: mastodon, mammoth, *arcla*, saber-tooth, hyenodont, Irish elk, eohippus, megatherium, glyptodon, and other primitive mammals. But all the rest of the inner earth was still in the coal age, the age of reptiles, out of which some species of pterodactyl frequently ranged far enough north to completely mix up outer-world paleontology by associating with the mammals.

The waters, where they now were, teemed with life. The sea grew calm and oily. Nautali floated by in their

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fragile shells, their thin lavender-colored tissue wings spread to catch each passing breeze. Instead of two waves of foam cast off by the bows, as in rougher water, the sea now gave forth two swarms of flying fish, like the grasshoppers which spring up to right and left as one walks through a hayfield.

At each side of the prow swam and plunged a dolphin, but these were reptilian dolphins, ichthyosauri, unlike the living dolphins of the outer world.

Everywhere floated jellyfish and purple kelp.

In the coves of islands that they passed, long-necked dinosaurs disported themselves, nosing down into the muck and then lifting their heads aloft with the water-plants dripping from their jaws. From what he could see of them, Eric judged that their bodies must be fully one hundred feet long from tip to tail.

Strange huge shapes could be seen moving through the jungle, and once in a clearing he descried some massive beasts like hippopotami, but with ruffed necks and three sharp horns on their faces. They were massed together, and were standing off an attack by some reptilian kangaroos, who were seeking to elude the offense of their horns and the defense of their ruffs, and get onto their backs. The ship passed out of sight, with the battle still in progress.

ERIC was fascinated by these scenes, but Helga and the crew took them quite for granted. However, they did not take for granted what immediately followed.

Suddenly a snakelike head and neck arose from the sea only a few yards ahead of them, to be followed by a large black body. The general effect was like a cross between a swan and a sea lion, but much larger.

The helmsman swung the bow directly at it, but it gracefully swept to one side, and, as the rowers beat on it with their oars, it arched its long neck over and lifted one of them off his seat with its slavering jaws.

The chainmail kept the sharp teeth from pricking through, and the brave fellow drew his knife from its sheath and started slashing at the head of his captor. This, however, had no other effect than to bewilder the plesiosaur, which tossed its head this side and that, in an attempt to elude the blows, its tiny brain never thinking to escape by merely dropping the man.

The beast's preoccupation gave the helmsman his chance. He shouted a command. The starboard oars backed lustily, while the port oars sped the craft forward. Round she swung, then crashed full into the saurian's side. The sharp three-pronged ram, at the waterline of the bow, did its duty.

With a squawk the beast dropped its victim and dived, and soon the man was hauled aboard, little the worse for his terrible experience.

Nothing further untoward occurred. After ten sleeps they hailed a rocky promontory joined to the mainland by a narrow sandspit, thus forming a harbor. The beach was lined with barges, most of them much larger than the one which was now approaching. Across the shore end of the sandbar ran a high paling. On the promontory were many pretentious houses of hewn wood.

The little craft entered and drew up to a wharf, where a large crowd, resplendent in blue and purple and scarlet, awaited them. Many of the crowd wore brilliant shoulder capes, caught with jeweled buckles at their throats, and on their heads were broad-brimmed peaked hats of white or gray felt.

"Nils! Nils!" called Helga excitedly, and some one in the crowd waved back at her.

Again Eric felt a pang of jealousy, but it was short-lived, for Nils turned out to be a mere stripling of twelve or fourteen, her younger brother.

Great were the cheers that greeted

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their lost princess. Word was passed around, and soon hundreds more were thronging down the slopes. Each seaman became the center of an excited knot. As one remarked: "More confusion than the *althing!*"*

Even the bishop himself, upon learning that his daughter had been found again, deigned to come down to the pier in person, clad in his flowing cardinal-colored robes and miter, a sturdy giant of a man with white hair and beard, who would have better graced a suit of armor than a churchman's garb.

With him was Gudrid, his wife, a stately matron who gave promise that Helga would not lack for beauty as she aged. He warmly embraced Helga and gave Eric a slap on the back that nearly felled him.

THEN every one proceeded to the Viking city, where feasts were soon in the process of preparation, while the heroes bathed and changed. In the big hall of every clan boards were laid on wooden horses and spread with linen cloth. Benches were drawn up, basins and towels passed around. Porridge was served by the women and eaten with horn spoons. Then boiled meat came in on wooden trenchers, cut with the hunting knives that hung at the men's belts, and stuffed into the mouth with fingers, to be washed down with horns of golden mead.

After the repast, basins and towels again. Then the boards and horses were cleared away, and the tale-telling began, while the women spun or sewed or wove, and the men whittled, and the children played about the floor or scratched the old men's backs.

Then the men slept on the seats along the walls, and the women retired to their own quarters. Eric slept in the hall of the king, for such he found Helga's father, Thorvald, to be, despite his title of "bishop." But the king himself had sleeping quarters of his own.

It took many days before the curiosity of every one was satisfied as to all that had occurred. The populace were frankly incredulous about Eric's origin and adventures, particularly his claim to having come out of the mythical past from non-existent Green Land and Vinland, beyond the frozen north. Even his claim to flying was overshadowed by his tales of America, where the sun actually sets!

During this time Helga took every possible opportunity to get little Nils acquainted with Eric. Finally, when she considered the preparation sufficient, she gave Nils a letter, written in runic, from his brother Mikjel. The letter was brief, requesting Nils to act as sponsor for the Vinlander, and suggested that his sister could supply details as to Eric's qualifications.

Meanwhile Eric had strung a wire along the roof of the bishop's house, and had daily tuned in on Angus. He did not wish to have any fiasco here, like the first time they had tried a concert at the plateau, and had failed to get a single American station. So this time he wanted to make sure of everything before exhibiting the radio.

The time between sleeps was running a little differently here than at the plateau, and neither was paying much attention to the clocks of the two friends, all of which accounts for some apparent peculiarities in the time of day.

One afternoon Eric and Nils made a formal call on the bishop in his audience hall, carrying a large bundle. A considerable retinue of friends attended them, and waited on the outside.

As was the custom, the two visitors and their host chatted of one thing and another, but carefully avoided all personal subjects. Just before it was time to leave, Nils started in praising Eric

*The Norse assembly.

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and his accomplishments, finally unrolling the bundle and displaying the tiger skin, fifteen feet from tip to tip. It had stretched some in curing. In fact, it had stretched as much as Helga and Astroo could make it do.

This was the crucial moment. The boy and the young man rose to go. They started to gather up the skin again. If the bishop should show them to the door, it would constitute "the winter way," a refusal of Helga's hand. If, on the contrary, he were to express interest in Eric's prowess, and invite them to stay to discuss it, this would amount to an acceptance.

It was the most anxious and nervous moment of Eric Redmond's life. But, regardless of what the bishop's intentions might have been with regard to his daughter, he would have been more than human if he could have suppressed his cry of amazement at the size of the skin of the saber-tooth, the story of the killing of which had been withheld until now.

"HOW many men fought and bested that monster?" he asked in awe.

"One," replied his son. "Eric Redmond."

"My boy!" exclaimed the bishop. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

"God bless you, sire," fervently uttered Eric.

In his interest in the trophy the old chieftain had completely forgotten the real object of the visit. He blinked a moment at his two callers.

Then he smiled and said: "You have borne out the true ancient purpose of the test, namely, to relate such tales of prowess as actually will win the attention of the father of the maid. In this you have so far succeeded that I forgot myself quite. But now the tale can wait. I am sure that it is as wonderful as the skin. Let us, however, come to terms."

A princely dowry was proposed. Eric looked pleased, but Nils frowned and whispered to him: "You must match one-half of that, or you lose my sister."

For it was a Norse custom that, to determine the worthiness of a man to marry into a family, he must be able to give his bride a wedding gift equal to at least a half the dowry which her father provides her. How was Eric, penniless, to match the vast sum of gold and ships which old Thorvald was proposing to give with his daughter?

In the old days rash young penniless suitors would often promise some perfectly impossible bride-gift, and then sail away on a three years' pirating expedition, and either return with the necessary money or not at all. The affianced maiden was bound to wait for three years, but no longer.

Eric could not do this, however. He did not possess even enough funds to fit out an expedition. There were no rich neighboring countries for him to plunder. And besides, he did not wish to wait three years for his Helga.

In embarrassment he glanced at the wrist watch which he wore.

If you ask a man abruptly what day of the month or of the week it is, he will usually look at his wrist watch. Almost any sudden question on any subject may produce the same result. So will a sudden embarrassment.

In looking at the watch, which by the way was Angus's, Eric noted that the time was almost 8 P.M. by the purely arbitrary scale which he and his friend had adopted. To relieve the situation, and give him time to think, he suggested that they repair to the main hall, where he had something more to exhibit.

There sat the radio set. It was so wired that it could send and receive on two widely separated wave lengths, so that conversation both ways could be carried on simultaneously as in an ordinary Bell telephone. Eric got Angus on the air, and they conversed a few moments in English, while the bishop, and Gudrid, who had joined



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them, looked on, mystified, wondering why on earth any one should want to make such funny sounds into a black box like that.

Then Eric removed his ear-phones, attached them to the horn of his loud speaker, and switched off the transmitter.

From the horn came the announcement: "Station XAS presents the silver-tongued singer, Otho, in a saga of his own composition."

Then Otho's voice and the twang of his golden harp came across the ether, while Thorvald, Gudrid and Nils listened spellbound. And to kill two birds with one stone, Otho sang the saga of Eric and the saber-tooth.

When Angus finally signed off, the bishop murmured: "'Tis the ravens of the All father! I would give half my kingdom for that little box."

To which Eric, by a flash of inspiration, replied: "Then I offer it to my bride to match one-half of your dowry."

## CHAPTER XX.

### TO THE RESCUE.

A FEW days later the formal betrothal took place. At the altar in the center of the Christian church, which still retained many of the pagan customs of Norseland, Bishop Thorvald placed his daughter's hand in that of Eric, and rested both on the large gold swearing-ring, while together the two young folk recited the ancient service which begins:

> "Thou, Helga Uppri, bindest me in lawful betrothal; and with taking hold of hands, thou promisest me the dowry, and engagest to fulfill and observe, without duplicity or deceit, the whole of the contract between us, which has been announced in the hearing of these witnesses, as a true and duly authorized covenant."

As they emerged from the church, amid the congratulations of their friends, Helga hung on his arm and murmured in his ear: "And now Eric, my brave one, you are my legal guardian, and are responsible for my honor, and must avenge my death."

"Please don't die, dear," replied Eric. The very thought of it caught at his throat. Her escape had been so narrow.

The betrothal banquet was held in the bishop's hall. After the tables had been cleared away, Bishop Thorvald made a speech and introduced the priceless radio set, Eric's bride-gift.

But instead of a program, what he got was this: "Mikjel instructs me to report that the skraelings have returned by thousands and are besieging the plateau. Altoonah is alive and leading them. He demands the surrender of his sister Astroo, and also Helga to be his bride. He refuses to believe that Helga is no longer with us. Mikjel craves reënforcements; also that you bring the wives and fiancées of his men, and more colonists as well. He asks that you explain to his father, the bishop, all the advantages of a colony in this fertile land."

Then in English, for Eric's ears alone: "Stand by when I finish the official communique, for I have words for you."

Eric switched on the sending apparatus and transmitted in Norse: "I understand. Better put Mikjel on the air to talk direct to his father."

"Meeting dismissed," thundered Thorvald, as he strode over to the instrument. Eric fitted the ear-phones on Thorvald's head, and soon the white-bearded Viking was holding a telephone conversation with his son some three hundred miles away, as naturally as though he had been doing it for years. The guests crowded out, to spread the news through the city. Only Thorvald, Gudrid, Helga, Nils and Eric remained.

When all the arrangements for the relief expedition had been completed, Eric took the phones, and called out in



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English: "All right, old pal. What's on your mind."

"A lot!" Angus replied. "In the first place I am under arrest, under sentence of banishment, and have only stayed long enough to put across this conversation for my blood-brother, Mikjel. It happened in this way: I followed Astroo into the woods one day, to have a show-down, and see if I couldn't make up with her over the killing of her father. No time for details; they are likely to cut in on me at any moment now. Well, at last we succeeded in making up. She still loves me, in spite of my killing Goovah. She realizes that, in a battle, one can't pick and choose one's victims. But just as we were in each other's arms, along came that confounded Glúm, the man who got sore when Mikjel made me his blood-brother. He ran and told, and I was haled before the *althing*. They decreed banishment, for they had no alternative under the law. Against the law to love a skraeling, you know. But, Eric, I swear I don't believe that that beautiful girl is a skraeling!

"Outlawry, confiscation of all my goods; no one to harbor or aid me under risk of banishment himself; any one free to kill me without penalty. I could see Glúm's eyes gloat, as the president of the *althing* read this part of the sentence. Mikjel saw it too, and so he announced that, outlawry or no outlawry, his oath of blood-brotherhood still held, and that he still considered himself bound by his oath to avenge my death. The *althing* went into session again on this question, and finally ruled that Mikjel was right. Glúm was fearfully upset. Just as they were going to turn me loose, the skraelings appeared. Glúm brightened up considerably at this, for the savages may be expected to make short work of me when I am sent down the shaft. But Mikjel kept me long enough so as to get his message through to Bishop Thorvald.

"I have hidden one rifle, one automatic and half the ammunition under the floor of your old stone hunt, for your use. My share is now on the ledge of the rock of the *skwaa*, in the big glider—which we had hoisted back onto the plateau. When I get through talking with you I shall make a break, run for the glider, and be off over the heads of the skraelings. Leave word for me occasionally in the cockpit of our old plane. Tell me about Astroo. I will leave messages there for you to give her. Thank God that no one but you and I can read English. If I talk any longer, Mikjel may get into trouble. Good-by. Good luck to you and Helga."

"Good-by, Angus," replied Eric. "I will attend to the messages. We will find some way to get you back, I am sure. Ask Mikjel to stay on the air for a few minutes. Do you get me?"

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### VIKINGS TO THE RESCUE.

NO answer came. After twenty minutes of failure to get any response, Eric switched off. Next day at the same hour he again tried to get the plateau, but without results.

The third day the northward expedition set forth, Eric and Helga with it, Bishop Thorvald personally in charge.

One hundred Norse ships rowed out from the city of the Vikings. These craft were of varying sizes, but all were of the same construction: a single bank of oars on each side; high prow surmounted by a dragon's head; high stern, with a dragon's tail; one mast; and one square striped sail. Along each gunwale hung the brilliantly decorated shields of the rowers. Some of the ships carried warriors; some, women; and some, freight. There were over a thousand fighting men, all told.

The winds were unfavorable, the

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sails could not be used much of the way, and it rained a good deal of the time; so that it was thirty-two sleeps before they reached the little bay by the cliffs, at the foot of the trail to the plateau.

Eric had brought the radio set along. Every time that twenty o'clock showed on his chronometer, he tried to tune in on Angus's set, but without results. He and Helga spent much time in speculating as to whether their friend had succeeded in making his get-away as planned. Thorvald, the bishop, worried more over the state of siege, although Helga and Eric kept assuring him that the plateau was absolutely impregnable.

They reached their destination without event, and at once sent scouts up the trail to reconnoiter and to post guards at the edge of the plain. The scouts reported that the plateau was still invested, so that it must still be holding out. Accordingly, Thorvald decided to wait for one sleep, so that the mariners could get their shore-legs back before commencing the attack.

The little beach would hold only a fraction of the ships, so the rest were strung out in every cove along the shore for a mile or more. The awnings were spread on deck, but the food was eaten cold, lest the smoke of fires attract the attention of the enemy.

After a long rest, the warriors dined again and then set out single file up the three-mile trail. A single file of one thousand warriors will string out for about a mile. Only a handful were left to guard the women and the ships, for Thorvald meant to deliver as crushing a blow as possible to the skraelings.

The line reached the edge of the plain, with the enemy still oblivious of their presence, and at once formed a "boar's head." This is one of the chief accomplishments of land warfare among the Vikings. First come two men, then four, then six, eight, ten, *et cetera*, usually up to about sixteen, which number continues for each rank for the rest of the column. The boar's head marches in solid formation. Shields are carried on the outside in an overlapping line. The outer men are armed with spears, and those on the inside with bows and arrows. All carry swords, and clubs or maces.

But the most remarkable things about a boar's head are the way in which the Norsemen automatically step up and fill the gaps, and the way in which, at a word of command, a new boar's head can instantly be formed on either flank at exactly the point of any flank-attack.

The head was organized, and moved slowly out, as the rest of the force filed up the trail and formed rank upon rank behind. Thorvald was in command in the middle of the column, near the point. Eric commanded a special detachment at the rear.

THE enemy soon noticed the approaching army; but, doubtless misjudging its numbers from its compactness, sent only a small force against it at first. As this force approached, the spearmen of the boar's head knelt, and the archers sent forth a shower of arrows. Thereat the enemy detachment bolted, leaving many dead, and without having come near enough to throw a single javelin. The boar's head moved slowly and steadily on again.

The skraelings now gathered all their available men, and again advanced, but in a long front without any appreciable military formation. Again the spearmen of the boar's head knelt, but this time the archers did not fire.

The two armies halted, facing one another. Above the naked hordes towered Altoonah, now king of Skraeldom, through the death of his father, Goovah. He, alone of his forces, was clad in mail and helmet, like the Vikings. Even the wings were there, instead of the horns which his father had worn.

Above the archers of the well-or-

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dered boar's head, towered Bishop Thorvald, his white hair and beard flowing down over his coat of mail.

Each surveyed the other in silence for awhile, and then Altoonah spoke: "We outnumber you ten to one. Depart in peace, for I would be friends with the Vikings. But give me your daughter Helga in marriage, and let us be allies forever. What is your answer, O bishop?"

Thorvald replied: "My daughter Helga is already promised to another, and we Vikings do not break our plighted words. Furthermore, the daughter of a Christian bishop is not for such scum as you. My answer is war, war to the hilt."

"So be it," cried Altoonah, raising his club.

"Fire!" shouted Thorvald, and his archers loosed their shafts.

Most of them shot at the skraeling chief, and scores of arrows clattered off his shield. Then, with shouts of bestial rage, the skraelings charged. They were met on the points of a solid row of lances, and when these were filled with dead, the spearmen used their swords.

Skraeling javelins flew in showers into the column. The Norse archers replied with arrow after arrow, and not until their quivers were empty did they raise their shields in their own defense.

Wave after wave of naked yellow bodies surged over their dead and against the boar's head, but it held intact. Flank attacks were tried *en masse,* but new boar's heads formed automatically to meet them.

At last the fighters mingled together, and the formation which had taken so many savage lives was no more. The fighting became disorganized. And striding through the mêlée toward each other, came two mighty bearded giants, one brown-haired and one white.

Meanwhile Eric and his detachment skirted the edge of the plain under cover of the woods and gained the entrance to the plateau. Soon they were scrambling up the shaft. His idea was to get his rifle and automatic.

At the top he found a haggard throng girding for the fight.

"We starve," Mikjel announced, when they had exchanged greetings. "For days we have been without food. I shall send my men to skirt the plain, and go to the ships for provisions for the women, while I go to fight beside my father."

"Wait a minute," suggested Eric. "Perhaps I can get Helga on the wireless, and have food sent up to meet you."

"Alas, no," replied the Norse prince, "for the magic box will talk no more, since elephant-face left us."

"Then he got away all right?" eagerly inquired the other.

"True," Mikjel answered. "The prettiest escape I have ever seen. Ran to the rock of the *skwaa,* with Glúm and a dozen guards after him, climbed up the leather ladder while they were vainly shaking it, sat down in his *skwaa*-thing as they surged up the ladder after him. Something went bang and Glúm let out a howl and fell off the ladder, and then Angus sailed away into the air. The last that we saw of him, he passed behind a distant ridge to the south, still in the air."

"And what of Glúm?" asked Eric hopefully.

"A bad hole clear through one arm, and some bruises from falling, that's all."

"Too bad!" said Eric; then: "Let's get at the radio."

THE women hailed him at the village, Freya, Astroo, and the rest, looking haggard and wan; but he motioned them impatiently aside, for there was work to be done.

First he went to his own old stone house and found the firearms, where Angus had hidden them beneath the floor.

Then he went to Angus's house and took a look at the radio. One binding-

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post loose, that was all. Otherwise, everythink O K. Helga was awaiting him on the air at the other end, as arranged.

Briefly he sketched to her Angus's escape, the progress of the battle, and the shortage of food on the plateau. They had even been forced to eat *skwaa*. He arranged to have bearers with provisions meet Mikjel's men at the upper end of the trail. He told her that he intended to join the fighting now with his firearms.

Just as he was about to sign off, Helga announced frantically:

"The skraelings! They are burning the ships!"

"Hold the air a minute," he replied, then to Mikjel: "Is the other glider intact?"

"The *skwaa*-thing?" replied the Norseman. "Yes, it hasn't been touched since you left."

Back to Helga, Eric spoke: "I come in the glider. Mikjel will get word to the column, to send aid. Good-by, dear, I come."

Briefly he explained the situation to Mikjel, and suggested that the latter send two swift runners around the plain in opposite directions, to get word of the plight of the ships, to the rear of the column. But the prince had a better idea, and hastily scratched a message in runic on a piece of leather, which he then wrapped around a stone and directed Eric to drop as he passed over the column.

"However," he added, "I shall send runners, too, lest my message miscarry."

Taking his two firearms, his ammunition and Mikjel's message, Eric glided forth, while Mikjel and his men descended the chute.

The battle was a confused mêlée, with red pollen chokingly thick in the air, but the Norsemen appeared to be having the better of it. Like a white rock amid a tempestuous sea stood the mighty form of Bishop Thorvald Uppri, hewing to right and left with his battle-ax, "and let the skraelings fall where they may."

The rear of the column, the boar's tail it perhaps might be called, was being held in reserve. Eric swooped straight down on these, and was amused to see them flatten to the ground in momentary terror, as the crowds on the steamboat-wharf at Fort Monroe had used to do during the World War, when he and other flyers from Langley Field would drop from the sky and just skim their heads, at boat time.

Eric dropped the message, pulled back his joy-stick, and soared off again, over the woods and toward the sea.

The ships to the extreme southward were in flames. Between them and the next cove-full of boats, a considerable body of skraelings were driving backward a mere handful of battling Norsemen. Farther to the north, some of the Viking guards were attempting to launch their barges, while others were hurrying south along the top of the cliff, to join in the fray.

Eric swung south along the shore, his momentum by now almost spent; and, as he neared the contending groups, clasped his control-lever between his knees, and opened fire with his rifle. The savages broke in wild awe-struck terror at the invisible death, and scattered into the woods, as Eric sped past them and landed in a heap at the very edge of the bank.

Extricating himself from the wreckage, he sped back on foot to join his men. His rifle was now slung across his shoulders, and he carried his pistol in his hand. He was still clad in chainmail, and his dagger and pouch hung at his side, but he had left his sword and shield on the plateau, and his winged helmet had blown off during the flight.

A javelin sped from the bushes, barely missing his nose. He stepped back, wheeled, and discharged his automatic at the spot whence the spear had come. There was a shriek and a native pitched

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forward on his face. No more spears were forthcoming.

ON meeting the Viking warriors, Eric directed that all the barges be rowed into one cove and tied together. This was done. Then the men gathered at the summit of the cliff to guard this cove.

They had not long to wait, for soon a considerable body of men could be heard descending the trail toward this point. But it was the relief detachment from the boar's tail, in charge of Otho.

Eric kissed Helga good-by.

"I go to join your father and brother," said he. Then, leaving Otho in command of the ships, he sped up the trail. It was a rash thing to do, with the woods presumably full of skraelings; but luckily he met none. Perhaps they feared his firearms, and so gave him a wide berth.

When he reached the plain, he found the battle going against the Norsemen. So, at the head of all the reserves, Eric plunged into the fray, in the midst of which he could see Mikjel and Altoonah swinging at each other with their war-clubs. The white-haired bishop was nowhere to be seen.

As Eric edged his way through the striving throngs, with a shield, which he had picked up, on his left hand, a smoking automatic in his right, and his rifle still slung across his shoulders, he saw Mikjel go down. Altoonah, the skraeling chief, stood alone, head and shoulders above the throng.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### BATTLE TO THE DEATH.

AS Mikjel the Mighty fell in battle, Eric Redmond, still many yards away, unslung his Springfield rifle and let Altoonah, the skraeling chieftain, have a whole clip. Altoonah fell, but Eric was not sure he had killed the skraeling chief.

Both armies were now leaderless, but this fact had a different effect on the two races. The Norsemen were filled with increased valor and rage, whereas the skraelings fled in terror and disorder.

Eric made his way to where Mikjel lay wounded. Guarding him stood Glúm and a strange Viking, whom Mikjel between gasps introduced as Bror Hoglund.

Bror, Helga's traitorous cousin! Glúm, betrayer of Angus! Eric scowled at the two.

But Mikjel said: "Our cousin has retrieved himself. These two fought valiantly at my father's side until he was slain, and then defended my flanks. Let the dead past stay dead. I was getting the better of Altoonah, despite my lack of food, for he, too, was weary after his contest with my father. But then some skraelings got by Glúm's guard and cut my right ham-string, and I fell."

Eric examined the prince's wounds. The right heel-tendon was cleanly severed and there was a clean-cut hole in Mikjel's back.

"These are the work of Viking swords!" said he.

Whereat Bror hastily interjected: "Many skraelings were armed with swords at that stage of the fight."

Eric walked over to the dead body of the bishop. It lay face down. A pang smote him as he gazed on that mighty form, which would lead its forces no more. Then he examined the body. Thorvald, too, had been felled not by any club or battle-ax, but by a clean-cut stab in the back. Eric was hard put to restrain his wrath as, with narrowed eye-lids, he returned to Mikjel's side.

The wounded prince was carried to the plateau, as were the other wounded men. The women were brought up from the ships. The skraeling survivors were run to earth. Their cattle, consisting of some giant sloths—megatheriums—and armadillos—glyptodons

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—were driven to the foot of the plateau, and appropriated by the victors, some being killed at once for food.

Once more there was no trace of the body of Altoonah, the enemy chief.

A great solemnity pervaded all the little community. It was not due to the mere fact of the deaths. The Norsemen were born fighters, lived to fight, and died fighting. Their womenfolk expected them to fall in battle. But this particular battle had taken place under their very eyes, rather than far at sea in foreign climes, from which the news of the dead sifted back gradually, and seemed somehow unreal. And in this battle, practically every one had lost a father, brother, son, husband, sweetheart or dear friend.

The severest loss was the venerable bishop, who was beloved and revered by all as a veritable father of his country. Eric, being a modern and an American, not inured to the habitude of war, felt the death of old Thorvald even more keenly than the rest.

And then there were the wounded to care for and worry about.

Mikjel, now bishop by inheritance, was nursed by his wife Freya, and by Astroo. Little Nils, his brother, was now crown prince. Nils had eluded his mother, Gudrid, had got into the battle, and had distinguished himself in spite of his extreme youth, so he was in high favor with the men.

Bror and Glúm were in high favor with the wounded Mikjel, in spite of protests from Helga and Eric. The new bishop made Bror his bodyguard, and Glúm the bodyguard of Prince Nils.

BROR HOGLUND was much pleased with his appointment, for it brought him close to Astroo, the skraeling maid to whose hand he had long aspired. But she avoided him, and he had the good sense to conceal his infatuation from the eyes of the Vikings, lest he, too, be banished as Angus had been. Bror's story of his absence was that when he and Helga had been captured by the skraelings long ago, he had been forced by his captives to make the imitation tiger-tracks, which had deceived the Vikings into not hunting for them. Helga had escaped just before her first meeting with Eric Redmond; but her cousin claimed to have been kept a prisoner until he had just now eluded his captors, to join in the recent battle.

It was a plausible tale, and it convinced Mikjel, wounded and hardly in his right mind; but it did not convince Helga and Astroo, who knew the true facts. And most of the rest of the Vikings were inclined to disbelieve it.

No dog could be found for Thorvald's funeral, so little Nils and Eric each set forth separately with two retainers, Nils taking the rifle, and Eric the automatic. One of Nils's retainers was Glúm.

Both parties were gone a long time. Finally Eric returned with a single hyenodont, and the ceremonies could proceed, although Nils and his party had not yet been heard from.

Thorvald and the other dead Norsemen were given a Viking funeral. The sole dog was laid at the feet of the venerable bishop. At Eric's suggestion, skraeling bodies were utilized for the other dogs, for it seemed to him that skraelings were low-lived enough, and that even one of these savages would be as reliable a guard to Valhalla as would a sneaking hyenodont.

Under the tender ministrations of Freya and Astroo, Mikjel continued to improve; until, on the village awaking after one sleep, it was found that he had died while they had slept. Bror Hoglund, his cousin and bodyguard, had been alone with him in the watch in which he had passed away, but there was no evidence of any violence, and Bror was the loudest in his protestations of grief.

The death of Mikjel was the final crushing blow to the Uppri clan. Helga, his sister, Freya his widow, Gud-

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rid his mother, and Eric, his brother-in-law-to-be, held a sad and wrathful council of war together, but they could do nothing but suspect and wait, and watch. Little Nils, now bishop by inheritance, was still absent.

In a very short time the watchful waiting produced results, for Helga caught Bror making love to Astroo in the very house of the dead.

Bror was promptly turned over to the *althing,* of which Otho the Silver-tongued happened at this juncture to be president. Otho knew of Bror's past perfidy, and suspected him of more recent acts of treason, so the *althing* lost no time in promptly decreeing Bror's banishment for the unforgivable crime of loving a skraeling.

Mikjel was duly buried at sea, a whole barge being sacrificed in his honor. The grief of his family at giving his stalwart frame to the consuming flames was intense, but was partially assuaged by a deep satisfaction over Bror's predicament.

But this was short-lived. Glúm returned covered with wounds, and reported that his little hunting party had been set upon by skraelings, and that Nils and the other retainer had been killed. Glúm brought back Nils's rifle with him, as proof of the truth of the story.

This made Bror the bishop, as he was the nearest male relative of Mikjel and Nils. A bishop in confinement, under sentence of outlawry! The *althing* were frankly puzzled over the situation. Mikjel's surviving family held another council of war, their anxiety now outweighing even their added grief.

Meanwhile Otho led forth a punitive expedition, to avenge Nils's death, and if possible recover his body.

ASTROO, the skraeling slave-girl, attended the meeting of the Uppri clan with her mistress. Gudrid had never particularly noticed Astroo before. Now, as the others plotted and planned, the matron watched the slave-girl intently. Especially she noted the resemblance to her own daughter Helga. Her mind went back to the days of her happy young married life, when Mikjel had been a mere boy, Helga a little girl, and there had been a baby girl, too, and Nils had not yet been born. The baby girl had been stolen by the skraelings. She would be about Astroo's age now, if she had lived.

"My dear," said Gudrid to the slave-girl, "may I see your left shoulder?"

It seemed a strange whim, but the girl obediently shifted her kerchief and let fall the left strap of her kirtle. There on the shoulder-blade was a five-spotted birthmark, the shape of a tiger's track. Gudrid gasped.

Said she: "My little lost daughter, Astrid, bore such a mark!"

It was the girl's turn to be astonished.

"My name is Astroo," she announced. "Do you suppose—"

There could be no doubt of it. Astroo—Astrid. The supposed slave-girl was no skraeling at all, but pure-blooded Norse. Mother and long lost daughter embraced. Helga, who had always loved this girl, now welcomed her as a sister.

Unfortunately the news leaked out before any of the party realized what publication would mean to them. Bishop Bror at once clamored to be released; and the *althing,* in the absence of Otho's leadership, reluctantly granted his request.

Bror was now free to pursue his infatuation for Astrid, undisturbed. He strove in every way to ingratiate himself with his subjects. But Astrid would have none of him.

"If you are freed of outlawry by the discovery that I am a Viking," said she, "so also is my Angus. I cannot bear the sight of you, with him still in banishment."

And Bror, anxious to please her, replied: "To prove the purity and sin-

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cerity of my love, I myself will go in search of him. I shall take with me only one retainer, for I shall have the rifle which I inherited from Nils."

Eric had disputed the ownership of the firearm, but the *althing,* Otho being still absent, had awarded it to Bror.

Astrid, unthinkingly blurted out: "You can find Angus by taking the skraeling trail south of here for about one sleep, and then turning to the right when you come to the big ravine. He is encamped at the head of that ravine."

Bror raised his eyebrows in surprise, and asked: "How do you know? The magic talking box?"

But Astrid had at least enough sense not to implicate her friends by telling of the message-center which they had established in the wrecked airplane, and so said nothing.

So Bror set forth, accompanied by Glúm, whose wounds though many, had turned out to be suspiciously superficial. A short distance from the plateau, a skraeling stepped into the path ahead of them, and soon was in evidently friendly conversation with the two. From the skraeling, they verified the fact that the elephant-face was at the head of the big ravine, where none of the natives had dared attempt to rout him out, for fear of his rifle and automatic.

Bror and Glúm proceeded down the trail, and camped out just before they reached the ravine. After sleeping, they went on to the ravine and up the bed of the brook that lay along its bottom. At last they came to a barricade of neatly fitted bowlders, extending clear across the narrow gorge ahead of them. There was no one stirring. Cautiously they reconnoitered.

BUT Glúm stumbled on a piece of leather rope stretched taut across the path, and instantly a clatter resounded within the barricade.

A red-bearded head, surmounted by a broad-brimmed white hat, appeared over the edge of the fort, and a voice spoke with a strange accent: "Thank you for waking me, by ringing my doorbell. Who are you?"

Glúm ducked quickly behind a bush.

"I am a friend of Eric Redmond, sent to find you," Bror replied. "Astroo, for love of whom you were exiled, has been found to be Astrid, the daughter of Bishop Thorvald. You are free to return."

Angus was just about to leap over the barricade with joy, when he saw something moving in the underbrush beside the path.

"Come out of that bush," he bellowed, training his rifle on it.

Glúm sheepishly emerged.

"So!" said Angus. "It is you, Glúm, my enemy! Thank you for saving my life. Your friend here would undoubtedly have potted me, if I had exposed myself. His lies had me fooled for a moment."

"Indeed, sir," whined Glúm, "it is the truth about Astrid. And Bror, here, spoke truly when—"

"Hush, you fool!" hissed Bror, but it was too late. The identity of the other was revealed.

"You!" Angus whistled. "I have heard much of you, Bror Hoglund; and I shall take great pleasure in capturing you and dragging you back to Thorvald and Mikjel for well-deserved punishment for your treachery."

Bror and his henchman were slowly backing away down the path as he spoke. Suddenly they ducked behind stones, as the former called out: "Thorvald and Mikjel are both dead, and I am bishop of the Vikings. It is true about Astrid. And it is true that I was sent to fetch you. But I shall fetch you dead, and shall take Astrid for my bride. You will never return to claim her, for we be two to one."

Glúm, not to be outdone, shouted: "Yes, Thorvald and Mikjel are dead. I killed the old man in the battle with the skraelings. I hamstrung Mikjel as I fought beside him, and Bror stabbed him as he fell."

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"Hush, you fool!" hissed his companion again. But Angus proved a better silencer of the babbling tongue. The rifle spoke from the barricade, and Glúm's lifeless body rolled out from behind the stone.

WHITE with rage at Bror's perfidy, Angus leaped over the barricade, rifle in hand, and dropped behind a protecting rock.

"You are no longer two, Bror Hoglund," he shouted. "I come to avenge my blood-brother, Mikjel, as I am sworn to do. It is the *holmgang*, the battle-to-the-death, for revenge and for Astrid."

Fighting his way from stone to stone, the renegade bishop retreated down the valley, while after him from stone to stone followed the avenging Scotsman, grim, calm and terrible. Whenever either exposed himself for an instant, the other fired. Surprisingly, the shots of the Norse traitor were every bit as close as Angus's.

"Beginner's luck," said Selkirk to himself, not knowing that Bror had been noted for his proficiency with the bow, and that this had greatly helped him to learn marksmanship with the rifle.

At last the Viking reached a long, low stone, beyond which there was no further cover down the path. Angus lay entrenched behind a bowlder a little farther up. Every now and then one of them would fire, but the intervals between the shots of the Scot became longer and longer, until finally they ceased altogether.

After a considerable wait it dawned on Bror that his opponent was probably out of ammunition. He himself still had several rounds left. He must conserve them. He must use strategy.

So he crawled cautiously to the other end of the long rock which sheltered him, and peered slyly out. From this position Angus ought to be exposed. He was!

Bror could see the whole of the white hat, with some of the reddish-brown hair beneath it. The black muzzle of Angus's rifle still pointed at the other end of the rock which sheltered Bror.

Taking the most careful aim which he had ever taken in his traitorous career, Bror Hoglund pulled the trigger. His rifle belched flame. The hat spun round, hit squarely where crown joined rim. Angus's rifle clattered to the ground.

With a cry of triumph, Bror leaped to his feet, keen to deliver one final shot to his fallen rival, if it should be necessary.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### VIKINGS ALL!

BROR HOGLUND, the traitor, had waded to a throne through the blood of his uncle, Thorvald, and his cousin, Mikjel. But now, in fair *holmgang*, in fair duel, he realized he had slain his rival for the hand of Astrid.

As Bror sprang forward to deliver the *coup de grâce*, Angus, hatless and without his rifle, arose from a bush at some distance from the spot at which Bror had potted the white hat. Angus, unscathed, with an automatic pistol in his hand, a grim smile on his red-bearded lips, and a wicked light in his steel-blue eyes.

His hat, stuffed with russet leaves, he had left with his rifle behind the rock as a ruse. While Bror had been stalking him, he had been stalking Bror.

The Viking blanched as he saw him. Then wheeled and raised his rifle. But he never got it to his shoulder. The automatic barked twice, and Bror Hoglund stopped in his tracks, threw up his hands, spun completely around, and slumped forward on his face.

But he was not dead. Angus strode over to him, rolled him over on his back, and placed the muzzle of the pistol against his head. The Viking's eyes

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flickered open, and he looked square into the other's face. He was a traitor and a scoundrel, but he was no coward.

"You are victor," he said, grinning boldly, despite his agony.

"Let your last words be the truth," responded Angus grimly. "Is my outlawry really at an end?"

"Yes."

"And did you and Glúm really kill Thorvald and Mikjel?"

"Yes."

"But wasn't there another son?"

"Yes. Nils Uppri. They all think him dead, but he is merely a prisoner of the skraelings, to whom Glúm delivered him by my orders."

A flood of blood gushed from the Viking's mouth. He shuddered. His blue eyes closed, and he lay still.

Angus arose and retrieved both rifles and his hat. Then, returning to his camp, he gathered up food and other belongings and set off down the ravine.

As he passed the dead body of his late rival, he paused and looked at it for awhile, then helped himself to helmet and coat of mail. Then went back, and did the same by Glúm.

"I'd like to shoot a hyenodont," said he to himself, "and give *it* a Viking funeral, with Bror across its feet."

With a grim smile at the quaint conceit, Angus Selkirk strode down the trail, looking and feeling like a doughboy with a lot of boche souvenirs.

Near the bottom he encountered a skraeling, who held up one hand and said in broken Norse, "Peace! I come with a message for Bror Hoglund, from Altoonah, my chief."

"Bror Hoglund is taking a well-earned nap about halfway up the trail," replied Angus. "You may go to him if you wish, but I wouldn't advise you to waken him."

And he passed on down the trail.

IN due course of time he reached the plateau, and was warmly welcomed. Astrid, no longer barred from him by Viking law, looked at him long.

"Can you forgive me for killing your father?" Angus asked.

"But you see," she explained, "he wasn't my father after all. Oh, I would forgive you anything, Angus."

Meanwhile Otho had returned without the body of Nils. When Angus informed them that Nils was still alive, a new expedition was organized. But just as it was about to set forth Nils himself walked into camp!

When Altoonah's messenger had returned from his attempt to deliver the message to Bror's dead body, the skraeling chief at once thought of a crafty plan. Altoonah had been permanently crippled by Eric's fusillade, but his mind was as clear as ever. Calling the captive Nils to him, he offered to set him free if he would swear by his Christian God to grant Altoonah anything for which the latter might send and demand.

"But what have I, a young boy, which a great chieftain like you might desire?" Nils had asked, little dreaming that he was now bishop over the Vikings and the inheritor of all his father's and brother's wealth.

"If I am satisfied, you should be," replied the crafty skraeling.

So Nils swore a solemn oath, and was released, and returned home. He was astounded to find that he was bishop. He was still more astounded when, a few days later, messengers arrived from Altoonah, demanding fulfillment of his oath. For the gift which they demanded was Helga!

Nils was horror-struck at what he had done. He could not, as a Viking, break his sacred oath; yet he could not in honor give up Helga.

Otho, president of the *althing*, conferred with him and Eric; and at an eager suggestion by Eric, he roared with laughter.

"By my shield," he cried, "spoken like a true Viking! It is the honorable thing to do—and how I would love to see Altoonah when he hears the message!"

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They called the skraeling messengers to them, and Otho spoke:

"Tell Altoonah that what our bishop, Nils Uppri, can give, he will give. But the ignorant skraeling has asked the impossible. Nils has no power over the lives and bodies of his subjects, a power that rests in the *althing* alone; nor can he give away the hand of his sister; for Helga Uppri is already pledged to a Viking warrior, our valiant Eric."

Eric then broke in: "And that Viking warrior, Eric Redmond, says to Altoonah that he wishes nothing better than to meet Altoonah, or any other skraeling champion, in fair *holmgang* to the death, if Altoonah and his pestilent tribe of skraelings feel they have any further claim on him, or Helga Uppri, or Nils."

The messengers quailed before his wrath, and scuttled away. Nor could Altoonah find any skraeling willing to meet the mighty Eric in single combat.

Angus became betrothed to Astrid, Nils giving her a handsome dowry, and entirely waiving the bride gift in return, for he remembered the worriment that he himself had gone through in trying to work Eric out of a similar predicament when he had acted as Eric's sponsor.

Eric, Angus, and Otho the Silver-tongued were all made "yarls," or earls; Eric was to rule over the southern city, Angus over the plateau, and Otho over another colony.

The principal radio set was left at Angus's plateau, for the other set was to belong to Helga by right of bride gift.

The two young couples returned to the southern city with Nils, and were duly married there in the Christian church, with full Norse ceremonies, white linen scarf and all.

But, for the present, the savage hordes were effectively subdued. Peace reigned over the land. Nils governed wisely, and the two pairs of lovers were happy in their hard-won bliss.

AFTER awhile Eric and Helga visited Angus and Astrid. At the banquet given in their honor on the plateau, Angus proposed the toast:

"To the man who made all this possible, Editor Gifft, of the Milwaukee *Eagle!*"

As they drank the toast, Eric's face sobered, and he said: "We owe Gifft a great deal, and we've never given him the north pole scoop, to which he's entitled. Let's try to get a message through."

But Angus shook his head and replied: "If we can't pick up any outer-world stations here, how can we hope to reach them with our message?"

"I've been thinking about that," said Eric. "Wasn't there an old bird down in Maryland who used underground antennæ during the World War? We want to send through the ground. Let's try that!"

"A clever thought," agreed Angus. "It certainly ought to work."

Eric added: "I almost wish we could go back to Milwaukee for awhile, and share in Gifft's triumph. This is going to put Milwaukee on the map!"

"If you went home, as is," laughed Angus, "you'd be a nine-days' wonder, all right. "The beard that made Milwaukee famous!"

"It's nothing to yours," Eric replied, "old 'elephant face'!"

And so in due course they tried the Rogers underground aërial, with the result that the world learned that there is no north pole! As he concluded his amazing radio narrative, Eric added:

"Neither of us has any desire to return to the outside world. Here is the land of eternal warmth, where the sun always shines. Here there is rich soil, big game, room for all. Here we have found power, adventure, happiness. We, Vikings, greet you of the outer world. *Skaal!*"

THE END.

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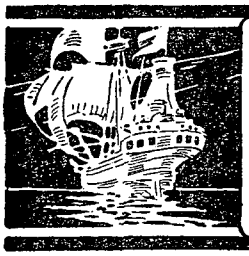

# Argonotes

## The Readers' Viewpoint

### A. MERRITT

A. MERRITT. Where is he? Why hasn't he been appearing in ARGOSY? We have had hundreds of letters asking these questions, but as we had no definite answer we purposely kept them out of Argonotes.

One impatient reader complains:

Mapleton, Iowa.

Your Argonotes are certainly far superior to the old Readers' Viewpoint, and your whole magazine is much better. Now, we only need a few more different stories to make it perfect.

Do we have to wait another three years, as we did before, for another of A. Merritt's serials? In 1924 you published his "Ship of Ishtar," in 1927 you published his "Seven Footprints to Satan." That's a long time to wait for that very excellent writer's stories.

Burroughs, with his "Tarzan and the Ant Men," started me reading the ARGOSY, but it took A. Merritt's "Ship of Ishtar" to hold me.

ROY REICHARDS.

While another Merritt fan pleads:

Fort Thomas, Ky.

I have been reading the ARGOSY now some five years. I could not do without it. I want to congratulate you upon the wonderful serials and short stories in it. Now, Mr. Editor, as an old reader, would you please answer one question? You will be pleasing hundreds of Kentuckians, besides myself, if you will answer it. *Will you have a long new serial by Mr. A. Merritt real soon?* He has H. G. Wells and Jules Verne beat a mile.

W. B. BOEHNKE.

This fan waits anxiously for a Merritt announcement:

Memphis, Tenn.

Just a few lines to let you know how much I am really enjoying the ARGOSY as it is now. Please continue to use your excellent taste in the choice of stories for our magazine.

I await anxiously the announcement of a new story by Mr. A. Merritt. There is a certain beauty about his works which make them superior to any other stories you publish. His stories may be compared with those of Poe in this respect. Let us have more "different" stories, one each week. I notice with pleasure the announcement of a new serial by Ray Cummings.

Slater LaMaster sure has won me over with "The Phantom in the Rainbow"; it is one of the best stories ever published in the old ARGOSY. "A Brand New World," "He Rules Who Can," "Golden Traitor," "War Lord of Many Swordsmen," "The Raider," "Girl in the Moon," "More Than a Double Cross," and "The Sword of Vengeance" were all excellent.

Please continue to let us know what serials we may expect as you have done in the issue of January 12. Sure have enjoyed the autobiographical bits that have appeared in the old magazine. Let us have one of Slater LaMaster and one of A. Merritt, who is, I think, editor of a New York newspaper. I like the Argonotes, for they bring back memories of stories I have enjoyed.

HERBERT ROSENBERG.

At last we are able to make a definite announcement. Mr. Merritt is not a quantity producer; he works slowly—but his stories are well worth waiting for. After much urging we at last have him launched on a story for ARGOSY—a sequel to "The Face in the Abyss." It will be several months before the novel is completed, so we shall not be able to publish it until the winter issues. But it is coming—and lots more after it, we hope!

JOHN H. THOMPSON'S little stories are short, but they have plenty of admirers, such as:

New Boston, Mass.

I am glad that you are once more printing stories about *Bill* and his friend, and their adventures.

There hadn't been any in the ARGOSY for awhile, and I was afraid you had stopped printing them. All your stories are good, though I don't especially like the wild Western gun stories that you print every once in awhile.

ADELINE CARMANN.

ALL the way from India comes this letter from one of *Mme. Storey's* admirers:

Mhau, Central India.

I am not an American nor have I been an ARGOSY fan very long, but through a corre-



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sponding friendship of a girl who resides in the State of New Jersey I have been a regular recipient of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY for quite a few months. Soon I shall be in another spot of the globe and most probably the ARGOSY will follow me on. I am a British subject serving in the infantry, and the ARGOSY has appealed to me for its absorbing fiction during my literary leisure hours.

The letters from my corresponding friend and the ARGOSY have given me a better insight to the statistics and characteristics of my American cousins across the herring pond. I might say that ARGOSY as a weekly and for its class of literature is the best, or at least, one of the best magazines of mixed fiction I have had the pleasure of reading. Some of the stories were not so good, while others were excellent, but of course, most of the stories were those that would suit the literary tastes of the general run, and one can quite understand that it is impossible to satisfy every reader throughout the magazine. What is one man's meat is another man's poison. The Argonotes have interested me, and if an outsider's viewpoint is worth considering, I should say, keep Argonotes going. They are needed for ARGOSY's welfare to make it, as far as possible, a "one-man" magazine. For myself I liked "The Golden Burden," "He Rules Who Can," and I have just finished "The Phantom in the Rainbow," which was very good. *Mme. Storey* seems to be a character that will fit in at any time, and I shall look forward to more of *Mme. Storey* yarns. They remind me of my favorite sleuth, Sherlock Holmes and the inseparable Dr. Watson. Here's a long life to ARGOSY, and may it be ever prosperous.

C. ACHURCH.

## LIEUTENANT JOHN HOPPER rings up another success with "Texas Joins the Army."

Alexandria, Va.

I enjoy your magazine every time I read one. Several years ago when it was *The All-Story Weekly* I read it regularly, but since that time there have been periods when I'd miss getting it for three or four months at a time. Lately, though, I have been reading it every week. This week I read "Texas Joins the Army," by Lieutenant John Hopper. More power to the "loot," and let us have some more of *Texas* in the near future.

E. A. ROSEBERRY.

## FROM the home town of Mark Twain comes word from this ARGOSY fan:

Hannibal, Mo.

Here's a letter from the home of Mark Twain. I want to say to begin with that he wrote some good stories that were full of adventure, but the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY prints some just as interesting. I have long wanted to tell you how much I enjoy your publication. It is a good, clean magazine, and I like every page of it.

The first I remember of the *All-Story* was hearing my mother read it aloud every Thursday to the family. It was then called the *All-Story-Cavalier Weekly*. The first story I remember was the "Coin of Chaos," which was some story. Who wrote it? I can't remember now. I was then a very small child, but the stories made a strong impression, for I began to get it for myself as soon as I earned my own living.

Now I burn the midnight oil—or rather electricity—reading the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY and the Argonotes. Sometimes I go to the theater and see a dramatization of some story I have read in it and then I feel like saying—to employ a worn-out expression—"Whoopee!"

Fred MacIsaac is a real writer. His characters are so true to life that I really can see how such things could happen to every-day people in every-day life.

I think I will be reading your magazine when I am thirty, forty, and maybe a hundred.

GRACE M. MAHONEY.

## NEITHER Westerns nor *Mme. Storey* appeal to this reader:

Baltimore, Md.

Inclosing ten coupons on which I have written the stories that appealed to me. Those that didn't, I didn't read and they include all Westerns and the *Storey* stories.

Western serials are my chief dislike because of the eternal, inherent sameness of plot and characters. Even the scenery is dull. Of the *Storey* stories the weakness, I think, is technical. The impression that the chief character is not an American and the extravagant use of dialogue, *i.e.*, my dear this, that and the other. Otherwise Mr. Footner is a very clever writer. He should create another character to overcome the sentimental impression of *Storey* with always the thought in mind that people do not talk like that.

It is the different and the impossible stories that I like—love would be a more descriptive word—because I am able to forget everything in the fresh novelty that they bring. War stories, stories of far and exotic lands, of the stars, of the sea, of the bowels of the earth—they are the stories that charm and speed the weary hours.

My impression is—and I do not doubt that other old-timers hold the same view—that the serials of years ago were much better than they are to-day.

W. D. HEFFNER.

## ANOTHER batch of enthusiasm for "The Spectral Passenger":

Baltimore, Md.

I'm writing to tell you what a kick I got out of "The Spectral Passenger." I didn't read installment one, but I happened to be glancing over installment two. It looked good. I got the first part and read it. I finished the whole thing three nights ago and—well, Fred MacIsaac won me.

I have been reading the ARGOSY for about

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five or six months. The first story I read was "The Raider." It was fine.

I think some of your best serials since then are "He Rules Who Can," "Girl in the Moon," "War Lord of Many Swordsmen." Every other one was good, too.

CHARLES FECHER.

PRETTY well satisfied is this ARGOSY reader of a good many years:

Montgomery, Ala.

I have been a reader of ARGOSY for a good many years and here's a plea to keep it as it is, for I do not believe a better combination of fiction can be had for its price, or any other price for that matter.

I like nearly all the stories that you print. Good Westerns, "impossible," air, war, and stories of American life are those that I like best.

In my estimation—and also many others, according to Argonotes—"The Crime Circus" is one of the best that you have ever printed. Let's hear more from *Gillian Hazeltine*.

I am now reading "The Sea Girl," by Ray Cummings, and it promises to be a "corker." "The Phantom in the Rainbow," "The Raider," "Thirty Years Late," "The Scandal on Kitikat Key," "The Silver Fang," "Buccaneers of the Air," "The Golden Burden," "The Black Ace," but why go on? It would take hours to enumerate them, and they were all excellent.

Yours for ARGOSY! HENRY KARN.

MR. GLEASON contributes an interesting item which may have escaped the attention of some Burroughs fans:

Dedham, Mass.

As "Tarzan of the Apes" was first brought out in the ARGOSY and was held by many as an improbable tale you may be interested in this clipping:

AFRICAN WOMAN BELIEVED REARED BY BAND OF APES

Berlin, March 27 (A. P.)—A remarkable story of a native woman apparently raised among apes from childhood is told in the monthly report of the agent of the German firm of Kristeller, which has plantations in the Kameruns.

An elephant hunter saw a group of apes in some trees and shot one, the report runs. He found to his astonishment that it was a colored woman, completely nude, and without the customary tattoo marks. The mystery was investigated by the authorities who concluded that the woman must have been brought up from childhood by apes and lived with the group as one of them.

I was much interested in Wilstach's story, "Circus Blood." It was a good story, but very like in plot to his other tale, "A Circus Clean-Up," which appeared in ARGOSY of May 4, 1918.

In closing allow me to say Ray Cummings's "The Sea Girl" is the best story you have given us in a long, long while. I like your different stories the best of all you print. Hope Cummings has another coming soon. I have been a reader since *Golden Argosy* days. Am getting along in years, but if Cummings, Burroughs, Merritt, and Farley continue to turn out for you the different stories, expect to continue to the end. WM. H. GLEASON.

A READER for forty-one years is this one—and speaking up for the first time:

Butte, Mont.

I, too, have been a reader of the ARGOSY under all its names for more years than one likes to admit; suffice to say, however, that we love 'er still, ever since 1888, when the ARGOSY was a twelve or sixteen page paper, and when a seat mate at school used to contribute to the sheet.

Since 1888—that is a long time, isn't it, to keep quiet? Even now we are not sending in a list of likes and dislikes only to tell you, Mr. Editor, to keep the magazine as it is. I haven't missed a single number that I ever remember. All over the face of the earth it has followed me, sometimes delayed, but always catching up, and always looked forward to. M. R. COOPER.

## YOUR CHOICE COUPON

*Editor*, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

I did not like.....

because.....

*Name*.....

*Street*.....

*City*.....*State*.....

6-8

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# Looking Ahead!

***NEXT WEEK WE LOOK INTO***

## THE FAIR FACE OF TROUBLE

*A Complete Novelette*

**by ARTHUR GILCHRIST BRODEUR**

Author of "He Rules Who Can"

Back to the days of medieval France this fine tale takes us, to the time of Louis XI, when romance and adventure awaited at every corner. With care-free Sawney Armstrong, of the king's Scots Guards, we sally forth—and soon find ourselves neck-deep in adventure and danger, romance and intrigue. A stirring story well told.

***Next week in the issue of JUNE 15th***

---

There is also adventure aplenty in

## OFF DRY TORTUGAS

**by BERTRAND L. SHURTLEFF**

Sunken treasure off the coast of Florida. But salvaging it presented not only a diving problem, not only peril from undersea monsters—but unscrupulous human opposition as well. A good tense serial is the result.

---

## THE FOUR CARD DRAW

**by ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON**

is an unusual short story. Laid in the Chilean Andes. A poker game in which Fate played the last hand.

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# ARGOSY

## ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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